

ART IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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THE subject is a vast one. I cannot therefore give more than a few leading ideas on the general theme of art as it was used and understood in the Middle Ages. We could hardly begin from the early Christian artists and follow the history of painting, sculpture, music, stained glass and so on through the Byzantine period right up to the Renaissance. It is an inspiring and vast history, until modern times very much overlooked, but now studied in great detail through a whole library of volumes.

I should like first to deal with the general characteristics, because so often people have supposed that the lack of realism displayed by the artist of the Middle Ages represented a lack of skill. The earlier age of Greek and Roman sculpture reached an extremity of realism to be seen in such popular figures as the Venus of Milo, every detail of the human figure, every fold of the loosely falling clothes described in stone with a finesse of observation which today is called photographic. And later as the Middle Ages passed into the Renaissance we find the same accurate observation and skilful representation, culminating in the pathetic marble of Michel Angelo's Pietà in St Peter's at Rome. In between these two triumphant periods the Christian artists seem to have been like children unobservant of details and incapable of any but the crudest representation. The modern man trained in an age of photography and extremes of technique tends to measure all art by the accuracy with which the painting or the statue represents the natural object it depicts.

But this is a false judgment. Take the extraordinary head of Christ from the bronze crucifix now at Werden Abbey, cast by an eleventh-century Saxon artist. The huge eyes, the narrow chin, the hair quite unlike any real hair—some people today would think it grotesque. But the first thing to notice is the skill with which the head is shaped. The lines are all regular and completely under the control of the modeller. It is not as though the bronze was too unruly and his tool too awkward in his hands. No one looking closely at this figure could suppose that the Saxon monk

did not make exactly what he wanted to make. Nor could one imagine that his vision was so distorted, that he was so unobservant as to think he was making something which would look like the figure of a dying man in the natural order. Clearly, then, he had no desire or intention to create a photographic representation of our Lord hanging on the cross. Professor Morley writes of this crucifix: 'In such works one senses the emotional vein in Romanesque; possessed by the essence and force of his theme, the artist does not hesitate to distort material form in order to deliver more directly the feeling thus engendered. The affinity with ultra modern sculpture is astonishing.' (*Medieval Art*, p. 216.)

The same indescribable skill and complete mastery of tool and material is to be seen in the earlier Celtic illustrated MSS. in the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospel, or the St Chad Gospels at Lichfield. These elaborate masterpieces of the monk's pen and brush were created one or two centuries before the Saxon crucifix in the dark ages when the Celts were on the whole rather crude and uncivilized. But here in these Gospel books the artists' skill can only be matched by their wonderful imaginations. Contrast these illuminations with the excessively refined Books of Hours at the end of the Middle Ages. In these latter the clever and minute realistic pictures have been inserted on to the page in the gaps of initial letters: but the painting has little relevance to the rest of the page. In the Celtic manuscripts the animals and the human figures too are woven into the texture of all the other immensely intricate decorations which make up the whole page. So, natural objects are formalized on purpose to fit in with the artist's conception of the whole. 'Animate life is frankly reduced to pattern, whereby men and animals alike are integrated into the decorative system, and derive their undeniable vitality not from their own existence but from the dynamic scheme.' (Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 189.)

Going back still earlier, we can select the lost art of mosaic to illustrate the consummate skill of the early medieval artists and in particular their grasp of colour. The sixth-century church of SS. Cosmas and Damian in the Forum at Rome possesses the most moving and beautiful mosaic in the apse with our Lord in the centre standing on a pathway of clouds, the formalized nature of which might have been taken from a 'mackerel sky' except that they contain every colour of the rainbow. This treatment gives a

sense of depth and mysteriousness which places the figure of Christ in majestic relief. The style is derived from the Middle East and is said to have come from Antioch. It shows a complete mastery of a difficult medium in which the artist was able to portray faces and figures with great accuracy. Ravenna, of course, has the greatest wealth of sixth-century mosaics, and in all these the colour has come down to us without suffering from age or light. And it is not only the colour or skill which is remarkable in these patterns of little coloured stones, but also the sense of symbolism which inspired them—the sheep, the rivers, the trees, the doves, the fountains, all these figures which represent deep Christian truths were woven into the higher parts of the church so that when the worshippers raised their eyes heavenwards they were taught of the mysteries with the same sort of symbolism as that of the liturgy they were following at the altar.

This is of course the secret of the art of the medieval period. It was an art of Christian inspiration in a way that no subsequent age has been able to recapture. Although so much of Renaissance painting and sculpture was devoted to Christian subjects, the inspiration is not Christian in essence. The beautiful Madonnas of Raphael are pictures of beautiful women but they contain no inner feeling for the living truth of the Motherhood of God. By that time the inspiration had become human rather than Christian, if we may make the distinction. The artists were interested more in the human figure than in the mysteries of Christ. That is why their skill and technique was allowed full rein in describing the men and women they saw; so that the modern man brought up on photographic realism is led to think that the Renaissance artist was more skilled than his medieval predecessor. The medieval artist was, on the whole, restrained in his expression by the need he felt to express divine truths, infinite in their meaning and to be shown to the human eye and intelligence in figures, symbols and mysterious signs. The medieval artist was inspired by the Christian mysteries; his outlook was liturgical, which is to say inspired by the workings of God through Christ in his Church.

This does not mean to say that the inspiration was all of equal depths or vitality. There were many dreary mud flats when the Christian faith of the majority had become little more than lip service, and in a society which lacked any real Christian vitality it was not likely that its artists would discover the inspiration for

themselves. It is in fact remarkable that during the periods of revival when the faith took hold of men's hearts again their brushes and chisels and pens seem to have worked with a new vigour and perfection. This is noticeable, for example, in the drawings in English MSS. during the ninth and tenth centuries. In England before the revival under the leadership of St Dunstan, the drawings were stylized and lifeless; the figures of Christ and his Mother, of Angels and Virtues repeated the same motif of drapery and posture with a merely copyist's technique. But at the end of the tenth century, still under the influence of St Dunstan's reform we find the monks of Canterbury copying a Psalter which came from the Reims school a century before. The Reims Psalter, which has come to be known as the Utrecht Psalter (as it was presented to the University of Utrecht in the eighteenth century), was inscribed and illustrated under the impetus of the Carolingian 'renaissance' and is covered with the most lively little figures of ploughmen and angels, harvesters and symbolic animals. It reflects the life and beliefs of the times with a tremendous and delicate vitality. But the outstanding event in the history of this MS. is—for the purposes of my argument—that when it came into the hands of the Canterbury monks and was copied there about the year 1000 it was not repeated slavishly by a line-for-line reproduction. The copyists did reproduce everything they saw in the original, every figure, every tree and house, every scene, the reapers, the crowds entering the heavenly Jerusalem, the great themes and the minute details. And yet the English drawings are a new creation. The trees become almost like the work of a Chinese artist, ethereal, formalized, and with a simple, delicate suggestion of a tree; the houses and palaces become lighter and finer in their lines, the figures of men and angels even more lively. It is a pure copy and yet it is a pure work of art. And it shows that when the Christian faith was really alive it gave a real vigour to the art of the time, however much it depended on the work of previous artists.

The fact that the medieval artist copied the traditional figures of the Madonna, the crucifix, the angelic choirs, as they did so often, does not mean necessarily that they lacked inspiration, indeed they often preferred to work with a traditional form than to try to invent an entirely new conception. The artists of the last few centuries, when engaged in a religious work, would either

try to depict the scenes of our Lord's life, or the figure of his Mother, with a photographic accuracy based on historical research into the modes and manners of the time of Christ. Or, in more recent times, he would try to invent an entirely new conception of these themes in strange and sometimes weird patterns. The medieval artist would not have thought of his work in this light at all. Firstly he would know that it would be impossible to represent in photographic realism the mysterious and sublime figures of our Lord, the Apostles, and the other divine and human foundations of the Church. It would almost amount to audacious sacrilege to attempt such a literal representation; it would not only be impossible but irreverent. Nor would he try to invent new conceptions of these historic realities any more than the Fathers and Doctors of the Church would attempt new Christian doctrines. The Church is first and foremost a *traditional* society because based on the traditions inaugurated by Christ and continued in his Church under the protection of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, particularly under the influence of the Neoplatonic Fathers of the Church in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Byzantine artists regarded the originators of the first Christian forms as having been granted a special grace, glimpsing the glorious colours and sounds of the heavenly spheres and reproducing them in 'mystery', in other words in signs and symbols in human society, to be handed down from artist to artist, from musician to musician in the same form. We may quote here a paragraph from Dr Egon Wellesz's *History of Byzantine Music and Hymnology*. He is writing of the period before the great Iconoclastic revolt which destroyed so much of the early medieval art in the East.

'Jewish Christians and members of those Churches whose observances were particularly strict had always been hostile to the representation of Christ in early Christian art. They saw in such representations a breach of the Mosaic Commandments. . . . With the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles, to whom the mystery of the invisible God had to be made accessible in a familiar form, the material representation of Christ, the Virgin, the Apostles, and the Saints became inevitable, and was favoured by both state and Church, particularly since the reign of Justinian. . . . Soon the veneration of the ikons took the form of adoration. The theology of Dionysius the Areopagite has developed the Neo-platonic conception that the human

manifestations of the Supernatural Beauty are reflections of the invisible Divine Essence revealed to inspired artisans.' (p. 141.) According to the Pseudo-Dionysius the musician is particularly suited to the task of echoing on earth the divine beauty because he has heard the harmonies sung round the throne of God and mediated through the order of angelic spirits to the hymn-writer who echoes as best he can what he hears of the heavenly music. But the same theory holds good for the artist of the plastic arts. He also has to hand on the reflections of the divine Beauty mediated by himself.

Thus the traditional ikon of the Madonnas, the pictures of our Lady proper to special sanctuaries, etc., are copied over and over again. 'The painter of an ikon of a saint had to copy the features handed on to him by his predecessors, because the portrait was regarded as the earthly manifestation of the immaterial being; in other words, the painter had to give the "idea" of the saint, not the resemblance of the human being who became a saint.' (Wellesz, p. 51.) Without a living inspiration or faith in the copyist this formalization naturally killed the art, but given a keen spirit and true skill the method led to great works of art, each ikon or statue like its predecessors yet possessing a life of its own. In fact the setting of strict limits to expression leads the true artist to produce the greatest works, as with the poet who sets himself the severe limits of the sonnet in which to express what he has seen. The traditional form gives the painter or sculptor a much more severe discipline than is provided by the material itself with which he is working. And discipline is an essential element in art. The traditional paintings of the Evangelists, for example, sitting on their thrones, stylus in hand, with book and book-stand on their left, are nearly always the same. But in particular their drapery is almost fold by fold identical (Oakshott in the *Sequence of English Medieval Art* has two good examples of eleventh-century evangelists in this manner—plates 16 and 17). If we look at medieval art from this point of view we can begin to understand the formalization not only of the folds in the garments but of the figures and features too. It was inspired, at its best, not by a lack of technique or vision, but by the Christian spirit of awe and reverence for the mysteries, an awe which makes their art hieratic, because they saw everything ultimately in terms of worship. This sense of reverence was in

the atmosphere in which the medieval artists lived, at least during the revivals of spirituality. We compare this with the agony, struggle and gloom in which we live today and which appears in all the greatest contemporary music and painting and sculpture: the crisis of life has taken the place of the Christian spirit of worship as the inspiration of the modern artist.

To put it in another way, the centre of culture in the Middle Ages lay in the church, particularly the monastic church with its regular liturgy. The great majority of the medieval artists were employed like any ordinary artisan—and we must remember that on the whole they were employed like any ordinary artisan—on work connected with the church and the actions which took place in the church. The MSS. were illuminated for use by lector, subdeacon, deacon or priest, some for their study in the cloisters but the majority for use in office or Mass. The Exsultet Rolls in the early years of the period had the illuminations painted upside down to the text so that while the deacon sang the blessing of the Paschal Candle from the ambo the people standing round below could look at the pictures as the long scroll unrolled and fell down in front of the pulpit. The sculptor at first seems to have followed the art of the scriptorium with his elongated figures which filled up the spaces of the church:

‘At the end of the eleventh century there appears in Spain and Languedoc a style of monumental sculpture based on this tradition of ecstatic line, which constitutes the strangest mode of carving stone in the whole history of sculpture. One can understand it only by remembering that the dominant graphic art of the earlier Middle Ages was the illustration of manuscripts, so that the cartoons from which these sculptures were worked came from the monastic scriptoria. The effort of the sculptors of Languedoc was therefore to re-capture in stone, by dint of undercutting the sacrifice of mass to swirling line, the religious levitation of the draughtsman.’ (Morley, *Christian Art*, p. 41.)

In other words, the Word of God as pronounced solemnly in the liturgy inspired both calligrapher and sculptor. And we must remember that at least originally the mosaics, wall-paintings and sculptures in the church were devised as a unity of conception centring on the altar—often the figures were elongated or foreshortened in such a manner that the worshippers standing in the

nave could see them in clearer perspective as marching towards the altar, or ranging round the altar. From that unity of conception the wall-painters and the stained-glass artisans began to expound the great liturgical themes of redemption on walls and windows so that the people could learn visually the meaning of the liturgical year and the great mysteries that were performed in orderly rotation in the churches. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century glass of Canterbury and Lincoln, derived from Chartres and St Denis in Paris, describes series of events in the life of our Lord, or of the saints of the Old or the New Dispensation almost in the manner of the modern strip cartoon, but with exquisite colouring and characterization. The statues at the entrance to Chartres Cathedral describe our Lord's principal actions and character. The rest goes without saying: silversmiths, weavers, and the host of artists and craftsmen were all primarily intent on the action round the altar. What is more, they introduced the whole world of nature and fable into the church so that everything was drawn in to the worship of God. A study of the thousands of bosses throughout England—as undertaken by C. S. P. Cave—shows all sorts of birds and beasts, and strange figures, like the green man, enlivening the vaulted ceilings of the church: and similarly the misericords, which supported the monks and choristers in their standing for prayer, are full of lively legend and the ordinary daily things of life. These often highly skilled works of art were in a sense a distraction from worship for the people of God in the liturgy—they were hardly seen and often they seem to have been devised for the amusement of the sculptor, since hardly anyone could see the figures on the bosses high in the arch of the ceiling. But they were more than a distraction if we remember, for example, how many of the early monks and hermits reputed for holiness were on friendly terms with animals and with the whole of creation. The beasts were the companions of many a Celtic hermit as well as of St Jerome, and the bestiaries were no mere primitive scientific manuals. They showed the works of God and his works were to give him glory through the voice and hands of man. So the serpents and pigs, as well as the exquisite foliage of Southwell Cathedral, where all the main trees of England are carefully and skilfully carved on the capitals, were all brought into the church into which they were woven as integral parts.

Finally, I would like to conclude this paper with a particular example which will I hope reveal something of the spirit of the medieval artist. At Barcelona during the Eucharist Congress a few years ago there was an exhibition of crucifixes carved through the centuries. The earlier the crucifix, the more reposeful and triumphant the figure of Christ. He was often asleep in his death, with wonderful repose and with a sense of triumph and victory over death. But the nearer in date the crucifix was to the Renaissance, the more agonized and writhing was the figure. The sculptor was vainly trying to capture something of the sufferings of our Lord which were infinite. Such a task was in fact impossible and in attempting it the sculptors forgot the true spirit of the crucifix which is that of redemption, of triumph over the devil, of victory over sin. This is our salvation. The spirit of the earlier Christian sculptors was far more deeply Christian because it went to the inner reality without attempting to portray that reality by means of a foolish attempt at realism. The spirit had so far left the later Middle Ages as to deprive the artists of a really profound inspiration; they were now humanists concerned with the humanity and the human suffering of Christendom. We must examine the works of the best period of the Middle Ages from the point of view of the inspiration which lay behind them rather than from the realism or skill with which they were executed. Only then should we really understand the art of the Middle Ages.