

## CHRIST THE WORKER IN ART

IN the four centuries preceding the Reformation, the decoration of the walls of churches was an important form of the art of painting. In many English parish churches the whole of the interior may have been covered with pictures. The subject matter generally included scenes from the Gospels and Lives of the Saints, but varied considerably according to the locality and period. Although a higher degree of artistic merit was attained in many of the illuminated manuscripts and panel paintings produced by the great monastic centres and by the Court school at Westminster, the wall paintings were often more representative of contemporary ideas.

At the present time, only a comparatively small proportion of mediaeval wall-paintings remain in a good state of preservation. It is recorded that after the Reformation, Puritan iconoclasts destroyed literally thousands. Fortunately, however, some were only covered with whitewash, and others had been obscured by additional stonework, and these have been brought to light again. Many accurate copies of these have been made by Professor Tristram, of which eight hundred are in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, the social changes following upon the Plague were reflected in the wall-paintings. It would appear that in this period of social unrest, something very like our present idea of Christ the Worker came into being. Wall-paintings began to appear having for their subject Christ as a poor man, displaying his wounds, and surrounded with workmen's tools. The usual cruciform halo is absent, and in some cases the tools take its place. About fourteen or fifteen examples of these paintings are to be found in various parts of the country, in Buckinghamshire, Suffolk, Berkshire, Sussex, Gloucestershire, Cornwall, and Pembroke.<sup>1</sup> Considering the large number of paintings which were destroyed, the fact that so many survive is a good indication of its popularity at the time.

One of the best examples is at Ampney S. Mary, Gloucestershire. Around the figure of Christ are arranged a variety of objects, such as a mallet, axe, wheel, pincers, knife, and many others. The picture is situated beside a door in the wall, and is continued on the other side of the door, where there is a representation of a procession, showing women carrying distaffs and labourers being received by St. Peter in Heaven. On the wall opposite appears a painting

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. Borenius and E. W. Tristram; *English Mediaeval Painting* (1927).

of St. George slaying the dragon. A few other examples may be briefly mentioned. At Stedham, Sussex (this painting is no longer in existence), Christ was shown standing on a cart, and the whole figure covered with scars. The tools were arranged to form a kind of halo. Alongside, the Blessed Virgin was shown, seated, with outstretched mantle. Several examples are to be found in Cornwall. At Breage, the figure of Christ is shown crowned, against a background of tools without any particular arrangement. The workmanship of the Cornish examples is poor; in fact, none of these paintings reach the same standard of artistic skill as most other types of contemporary wall-painting. This may well indicate that the movement which was responsible for the production of these paintings originated amongst the poor. There is no evidence of the highly finished work which would be expected by a wealthy patron.

It is considered by Professor Tristram that these paintings may have been inspired by William Langland's 'Vision of Piers Plowman.' Referring to an example at Hessett, Suffolk, he says<sup>2</sup>: 'Here the figure of Christ or Piers Plowman has almost disappeared. The halo of tools, however, which is exceptionally elaborate is fairly clear . . . . Immediately over the figure is an allegory of the Seven Deadly Sins (very common in the latter fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries). From its position it is clear that the painter intended it to be read with the allegory of Christ. The tree of evil is depicted as springing up from the jaws of hell, with a demon on either side watching its growth. Its branches are seven in number and each terminates in the head of a serpent (compare the seven heads of the dragon of the Apocalypse), and each head bears in its mouth one of the seven mortal sins, the fruit of each tree. Pride, the top-most fruit, is a courtier of Richard II's time. There seems to be every probability that Langland's "Vision of the Seven Deadly Sins" was in the mind of the painter when he placed the two allegories together.'

It seems plain that something was being attempted from within the Church to improve the conditions of the poor, and that the movement was widespread and popular. The paintings showed the doctrine of salvation through labour, and by allegory preached against the evils resulting from the pursuit of wealth and power. The social conditions prevailing at the time were in some ways similar to those of recent years. Wealth was being accumulated by a minority, so that the working classes were being deprived of the means of pro-

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<sup>2</sup> E. W. Tristram in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. XXXI, Oct., 1917, p. 140.

duction and even of a fair wage. But if the conditions were to that extent similar to those of the present, it is obvious that the attitude towards religion in the fourteenth century was vastly different from what it is now. The wall-paintings in country churches would be seen regularly by the people of the neighbourhood, and would reinforce verbal instruction. In the sense that these paintings were intended to have a popular appeal, they may be compared with the propaganda posters or advertisements of the present day.

This makes it difficult to compare them with modern representations of Christ the Worker. Those which have been appearing recently are mostly of a conventionalised type which is too much inclined to take on the character dictated by the medium. Or, in an attempt to get away from the sentimental type of work, artists tend to a very broad treatment which produces a result often judged as crude. Sometimes the style is not unlike that of the mediaeval paintings themselves. This may be all very well from an art point of view, but unfortunately the number of people who are capable of understanding that art form is so small that the pictures generally fail in arousing interest in the subject. In mediaeval times the conventionalised style was general, and would therefore be understood and appreciated. To-day something possibly less interesting to the artist, but more capable of general appreciation is required to popularise the idea. In mediaeval times the philosophy of the artist and of his public were identical, and his works were in accordance with the traditions of the art of the time. At present we have so many schools of thought and points of view that any attempt to work on similar lines is impossible.

In the thirteenth century artists and craftsmen were enthusiastic in producing works for the glory of God, and that is why in some respects the work of that century, when a fully Christian culture flourished, has never been surpassed. If a period of such activity in the production of fine works of art is ever to be seen again, it will only be when the same philosophies prevail. And a fully Christian way of living can hardly be put side by side with modern industrialism. In large industrial concerns there is often dissatisfaction, even in spite of a reasonable wage. Often without knowing it, those who complain do so because they have no control over what they produce. Even if factories were able to absorb all available labour, and if everyone were paid a 'living wage,' this problem would remain. It is not possible that anyone with the instincts of a craftsman should be satisfied by irresponsible labour. But there is very little chance of a craftsman succeeding in private enterprise when almost anything can be turned out by a machine and bought

by a thoughtless public even when of a quality much inferior to the hand-made article.

Factories having absorbed those who would otherwise be working as individual craftsmen, it is unusual to find examples of work showing evidence of the personality of the producer, apart from works classed as 'Fine Art.' Thus, artists have now come to be regarded as a distinctly separate class, and their productions as something quite outside ordinary life. The present-day artist, being almost the sole surviving representative of the craftsman, may show the desirability of personal work; but much more could be done in this way if the work was intelligible to those who are most in need of enlightenment. The idea of Christ the Worker should have an influence in humanising artistic works. The wall-paintings of the fourteenth century may not have been of a high order technically, but they were at least painted for a purpose which could be generally understood; they were something arising spontaneously from popular ideas.

Individual effort is required everywhere to put fresh ideas into the minds of those who work in factories and offices, to bring about a return to the intelligent practice of religion. When this has been achieved, it may be realised that many kinds of factory production are not in accordance with human nature which these conditions cannot satisfy. Only when there is a return to a Christian outlook can we expect to see a demand for the work of the craftsman, and a revival of a flourishing Christian art.

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THE BORGIA POPE, ALEXANDER VI. By Orestes Ferrara. (Sheed and Ward; 16s.)

Dr. Ferrara has composed a careful, ingenious and slightly laboured rehabilitation of the moral character of Alexander VI. He has no difficulty in proving that many of the traditional scandals are palpably fabricated and that others have been at least coloured by contemporary gossip. During the last two generations few serious students of the Renaissance would have disputed this. With much careful analysis he shows that even in the residue of cases the contemporary evidence is confused and at times conflicting; this will not surprise anyone who has attempted to unravel the tangled personalities of the Italian *Quattrocento*. He emphasises all that can be said so truly of the high capacity and high sense of responsibility of the Pope. But he does not analyse the standard of relative moral values in late fifteenth-century Italy. If the Alexander VI of John Addington Symonds is primarily a mythological figure, the Alexander VI of Dr. Ferrara could never have grown into a myth.

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