



GRESHAM COLLEGE  
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## **Contemporary Christian Art Transcript**

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21 March 2012

**Christian Faith and Modern Art:  
Contemporary Christian Art**

Professor Rt Rvd Lord Harries of Pentregarth

This lecture is concerned with artists who are still alive, and only with those whose work relates fairly directly with Christian Iconography. This means that I am not considering here a number of artists who have a strong spiritual dimension to their work and whose work often has recognisable visual resonances with Christian themes. I think of Anselm Kiefer, whose work despite focussing on the destruction of Germany, has something of a mystical feel to it, Antony Gormley, whose work has been shown in Cathedrals and Marc Wallinger, whose work like that of Gormley's might be categorised as the expression of a spiritual humanism. I think of Bill Viola, whose work like that of Damien Hirst and Chris Ofili sometimes makes verbal or visual reference to particular Christian themes. Some of this work I admire hugely but I cannot discuss it here. I will be considering 14 artists, some well known, others not, who focus more specifically on Christian themes.

**Fenwick Lawson, 1932**

**Pieta**

**The Risen, Ascended Christ**

**The Body of Cuthbert being carried by Monks**

**Head of Cuthbert**

Born and brought up in Country Durham. Studied at the Royal College of Art and was influenced by Epstein. Head of Sculpture at Newcastle-on-Tyne College of Art (Later the Polytechnic, where he also became Principal). More than 50 works commissioned, almost all in the North East, with the majority in churches. Reflects German expressionist tradition, e.g. that of Ernst Barlach (1870-1938), who worked in wood and whose work was destroyed by Hitler.

**Peter Ball, 1943**

**Pietà, Winchester Cathedral, 2011**

Peter Ball was born and brought up in Coventry and was much influenced by teachers at his local school. He trained at Coventry School of Art and has worked full time as a sculptor from 1968. His secular work has often been described as witty, and he usually begins there, as in his religious commissions, with a piece of driftwood. He must be the most commissioned of all contemporary artists, with over 60 commissions from churches or cathedrals. This popularity is no doubt related to that fact that he has said that a work in a church setting. "Has to be a devotional object not an architectural set piece"

**Christus from the Flames, Cotgrave, 1998**

The first word that comes to mind on seeing one of these religious commissions is "Romanesque". Pamela Tudor Craig, after describing the drift wood and copper plate materials of his work says "So his Christus has, in the nature of its composition the battle-scarred endurance of a time-worn Romanesque Christus" and continues.

The large eyed narrow bearded heads of Romanesque art come naturally to Peter Ball. He is not the heir of the comely Gothic but of the tormented prophets of Souillac, or even further back, of Celtic spirit figures. His way of seeing is most suited, perhaps, to commissions for the Hanging Rood, or for a gaunt Pietà, but there is a tenderness in his treatment of the Nativity and in his Madonnas he can suggest something of the mystery that hedges about, for instance, the Holy Virgin of Rocamadour. But this sculptor is in no way a pasticheur of the Age of Faith. He has none of the subservience that would imply. His visual quotations are made with panache.[\[1\]](#)

**Virgin and Child**

**Crucifix, Winchester Cathedral, 1990**

**Christus Rex, Southwell Minster, 1987**

**Hope, St Martha the housewife, Broxtow, Nottingham, 1997**

**Anthony Caro, 1924**

**Descent from the Cross I. After Rubens, 1987/8**

Anthony, now Sir Anthony Caro, OM, originally read engineering at Cambridge but after war service studied art at the Regent Street Polytechnic and the Slade and worked under Henry Moore. However, he soon left aside figurate sculpture to produce his characteristic sculptures made from found pieces of industrial waste. From 1987-90 he worked on large sculptures stimulated by Rembrandt's "Descent from the Cross" in Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

**Descent from the Cross II, After Rembrandt, 1988/9**

**The Last Judgement, 1995-9**

This was presented at the Venice Biennale and was Caro's response to the atrocities of World War II.

**Chapel of Light, St Jean Baptise, Bourbourg.**

**Ruined Church**

As a result of World War II this church, some 20 miles from Calais, had remained a ruin. The French equivalent of the Director of the Arts Council for Northern France had seen Caro's 25 piece sculpture on the Last

Judgement at the Venice Biennale and wanted him to produce something in the then blocked up chancel area. Caro was amazed that when they saw this ruin together he was given complete freedom to do what he wanted.

## **The Chancel**

### **Waterfall**

As it was to be a baptistery, a priest suggested the theme of water, and this is what he has produced, associating also it with the theme of creation. Jewish by background Caro does not like the connotations of the word religious to describe his view. However he has said that despite everything life is wonderful and he wanted to convey a celebratory mood. There is some representative work on animals to help do this. He loved the space and light of the building and he wanted the work to help create a spiritual space for people whatever their beliefs. The work took some 8 years to come to fruition, and posed both the major challenge and a consummation of Caro's distinguished career. [\[2\]](#)

## **Oak Towers, melody and harmony**

### **Shirazeh Houshiary, b.1955**

#### **East Window in St Martin in the Fields 2007**

Caro's religious work is not purely abstract. At the least it hints at the representational, as have nearly all the artists we have considered in previous lectures. This is for fundamental reasons because Christianity is committed to the fact that the Divine Word became flesh, the invisible was made manifest. But even more abstract art can work in some contexts, as we saw in the case of the Ceri Richards with his Sacrament Chapel in Liverpool's Roman Catholic Cathedral. Amongst contemporary work in this genre I single out Shirazeh Houshiary, who born in Shiraz, but has lived and worked in UK since 1976. She trained at the Chelsea College of Art and has work in many major collections round the world. Her work draws on Sufi spirituality, particularly Persian mysticism.

## **East Window at night**

### **Alison Watt, 1965**

#### **Still, Old St Paul's, Edinburgh, 2004**

Alison Watt trained at the Glasgow School of Art and has been the youngest artist to have had a solo exhibition at both the Scottish National Gallery and the National Gallery in London, where she was artist in residence from 2006-8. She began as a figurative, in particular a portrait painter, but her work is now associated with studies of fabric. As has been written "These exquisite canvases edged towards the abstract yet had a strange quality which suggested human presence, or at least absence." Still was awarded the 2005 ACE award for commissioned artwork in ecclesiastical space.

## **Sophie Hacker**

### **Nine Panels in response to Messiaen's "La Nativité du Seigneur"**

These works, each 60 centimetres square were produced in response to Messiaen's "La Nativité du Seigneur" Sophie Hacker listened to the work many times, in a variety of recordings, and over a year produced nine works of art related to the life, and especially the nativity, of Christ. The works are low relief sculpture, but made mainly out of slats of wood, lead, wire and all manner of found objects, rather than stone. Sophie Hacker has a great love of these found objects and their possibilities as art.

## **The worship of the Shepherds**

For example, the work based on the theme of the shepherds includes flattened bark, handmade paper, hessian of different kinds, string and old leather. This has five thick strands of materials at a diagonal across the work, with their roots in the earth, against the background of a rising sun.

But although Sophie Hacker sees herself as a sculptor, she trained at the Slade as an abstract painter and one of the strengths of these works is the unity and interplay between the objects and the way they have been painted. Using acrylic, there is a powerful use of colour, which helps to give each work both its unity and its distinctiveness. Some of the works are very accessible, for example "Les Anges (The angels), with its swirling shapes in different blues. As has been written "Soft textures evoke the surface of feathers. Shards of mirror reflect light over the image, as the main shape sweeps up like a swarm of starlings. Metallic leaf and iridescence bring even more glimmer. All this articulates the chattering, high notes of the music."

## **The Worship of the Magi**

### **God among us**

#### **Jesus' acceptance of suffering**

Requiring more attention before it makes its impact is the work based on Jesus' acceptance of his suffering. Dominating the piece is a rough piece of wood of interesting texture and with subtle shapes in it, which emerges from a metallic background of brown with glints of gold.

## **Francis Hoyland, 1930**

### **Nativity Polyptych, 1961, Oxford Brooks University**

Francis Hoyland was born in Birmingham and educated at Camberwell and the Slade. He continues to teach and write as well as paint. He has always painted religious images in addition to his other work and became a Roman Catholic in 1979; from what he has written of himself and the relation to his painting, a devout one. For the last 30 years he has been working on a 91 picture series on the Life of Christ. This is not publicly accessible at the moment and I suspect it will prove to be his best work. [\[3\]](#)



## **Crucifixion, 1956, Arts Council**

**Jean Lamb**

### **Mother and Child**

Jean Lamb works part time as an artist and part time as a Church of England Deacon in Nottingham. She writes that she turned away from the church when young, but rediscovered Christ in the womb of creation. With the birth of her second child she discovered Christ there and offered him back to God. This is reflected in this statue, which clearly also has echoes of Mary and the Christ child.

## **Crucifixion**

**Iain McKillop,**

### **Pietà Gloucester Cathedral Altar Piece, 2003**

McKillop studied history of art at Manchester University and fine art at Kingston University. He has taught for most of his life, as well as being a prolific painter of Christian themes, particularly the passion. He now combines painting with ordained ministry in the Church of England. He has received commissions from a number of churches, including Gloucester Cathedral.[\[4\]](#)

## **The Miraculous draught of fish**

### **Gethsemene, the last supper**

### **Gethsemene, the agony**

**Maggi Hambling, 1945**

### **Good Friday, 1991**

Head a different way round, ambiguity about whether alive, pink, or dead, blue. Maggi Hambling studied at art schools in East Anglia then at Camberwell and the Slade. She has become one of the best known of modern British painters, first of all for her portraits in an expressionist style of people like Max Wall and George Melly, then for her controversial public sculpture, including the memorial to Benjamin Britten on the beach at Aldeburgh, of giant scallop shells. More recently she has turned to landscape and seascape in her native Suffolk. Every Good Friday she spends first reading the Gospels and then contemplating and painting the crucifixion. She began this discipline in 1986 partly as a tribute to her mother who was then very frail. Brought up to go to church every Sunday she says "Consequently it is very difficult for me to think of anything else on Good Friday but the crucifixion. The mystery. The sacrifice. The simultaneous life and death, and vice versa." She now describes herself as "an optimistic doubter."[\[5\]](#)

### **Good Friday, 2002**

Loneliness of figure

### **Good Friday 2007**

High and lifted up for contemplation. Her studies of the crucifixion are all very different, but deeply felt and fresh; some reflecting a recent visit to the continent are more traditional in image, others highly abstract.[\[6\]](#) She says that Good Friday brings out of herself some different image of Christ, which she cannot predict in advance.

## **Helen Meyer, 1929**

### **Angel**

Helen Meyer trained at Camberwell and Edinburgh Colleges of Art. Works in clay but mainly in wood.

### **Head of Angel**

### **Head of Angel**

### **Christ and John the Beloved Disciple**

### **Close up**

John 13, 23. On announcement that he would be betrayed "One of them, the disciple he loved, was reclining close besides Jesus. Simon Peter signalled to him to find out which one he meant. That disciple leaned back close to Jesus and asked "Who is it?"

## **Gethsemene**

Helen Meyer is also a painter

## **Stations of the Cross, fall**

In 1981 she did a set of Stations of the Cross for All Saints, Fulham and they were subsequently the subject of a Television film I did with her about them.

## **Stations of the Cross, Crucifixion**

She said that when painting this the words of Simeon to Mary kept coming to mind "A sword shall pierce through thine own soul also" (Luke, 2, 35). Her brother was killed in France with a Highland regiment in 1944 when he was 22 and she was 14. The sense of loss has remained with her and surfaced strongly when she was painting this scene.

## **Pietà**

**Peter Howson, 1958**

### **The Tempest**

Howson was born in London but moved to Scotland at the age of 4. He began as an infantry soldier in the Scottish Fusiliers but left to study at Glasgow College of Art. He has concentrated on tough, working class

figures and those on the edge of society. As well as being in major galleries his work has been collected by celebrities. In 1993 he was an official war artist in Bosnia. After a long battle against abuse and addiction, as well as being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, he converted to Christianity in 2000, his faith now being reflected in some of his paintings. They reflect both violence as in *Jesus Falls for a Second Time*, and compassion, as we see in *Jesus meets Mary*, two of his painting in a series of Stations of the Cross. *Judas*, 2002 shows him entering into the mind of the great betrayer. *Ecce Homo* has something disturbing about it and *Legion*, referring to the man in the Gospels who had the devils expelled from him, something of his own mental fragility and torment.

### **Nicholas Mynheer, 1958**

#### **Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane**

Mynheer was born and brought up in a little village 10 miles from Oxford, Horton-on-Otmoor. That is where he still lives. His father was a draughtsman and both parents were artistic. He has always drawn. He studied design at Hornsey College of Art and then went into advertising. Newly married with a very well paid job he was copying an old master one day when he knew he had to throw everything up and become a painter. With a young family to support he has known difficult times financially but has kept going with a very strong sense of Christian vocation. He has always focussed on Biblical themes and Christian iconography and has not been drawn to other subjects. Some of the first paintings that made an impact on him when he was younger were the German Expressionists, and we can see that his work has a strong expressionist element, a powerful emotional charge realised in the way the scene is depicted. Like so many of the artists that have been considered in this series, he also highly admires William Blake and Samuel Palmer.

#### **The appearance to Thomas**

Mynheer's style is highly distinctive. A picture or carving by him is instantly recognisable. Like his vocation to become a painter in the first place, it happened in an instance. He had spent more than two months painting *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, in the naturalistic style that was his at the time, when he suddenly realised the picture was really bad. Very depressed he cut out a small piece of cardboard, looked at the scene again, and simply drew on that piece of cardboard the elements in it that seemed essential to what he wanted to express. So, as we can see here, his approach is now to focus on the essential figurate elements and cut out all extraneous detail, which is one of the reasons why in the first place he was drawn to small paintings, because there was less temptation to put in surplus detail. The result is, for example, that a particular gesture can be highly exaggerated, and some parts of the body, an arm for example, if they are not part of the essential element are simply not painted in at all. The only way in which his style has changed over the years is that the exaggeration has got less, and the emphasis has become more subtle.

#### **The Last Supper**

#### **The Crucifixion**

#### **The Women at the empty tomb**

Here are two more paintings, like the first one shown, from his Sarum series on the passion, first shown in Salisbury Cathedral, which he will not sell, but which are shown from time to time in a church or Cathedral. He sees his work as very much in the iconic tradition, in other words not simply as works of art, but there to help people with their faith. But his intention is that they should first work not only at an artistic level, but in relating to a universal experience with which people can identify, and only then for people to see the Biblical resonances.

#### **Flight to Egypt**

#### **Rest on the flight to Egypt**

For example his paintings on the flight to Egypt he sees first as relating to the many people in the world today who have had to flee from their homes as refugees. These are well known scenes from Western Art, the latter derived from stories in an apocryphal Gospel, but he hopes that even people totally unfamiliar with the meaning of the scene in Christ faith will be able to enter into its experience.

#### **Elijah being fed by an angel.**

Traditional scene in icon-his paintings can have an iconic quality.

#### **Guardian Angel Icon**

#### **Christ and Peter**

In recent years he has taken to carving, for which he has received a number of commissions, at present he is engaged in bas reliefs for a font he has designed for a new church in Qatar. He took up carving by accident. He was on holiday with his wife in France and had said he would not do any painting so that he could enjoy looking at things with her. But he picked up a piece of wood and started whittling it with a penknife. When he got home he happened to show what he had produced to a gallery owner who immediately wanted to sell it for him. Because of this experience he sought out Frederick Lawson and learnt the skills necessary.

In this piece we see his characteristic style. Peter is looking up at Christ and making his confession, "Thou art the Christ" but his arm is also up saying "Save me", for when he tried to walk on water he felt himself drowning. On the top left is a rock on which are other followers of Christ who said to Peter "You are a rock on which I will build my church" and to the bottom left is the cock who signalled Peter's betrayal, so the whole story of the relationship of Christ and Peter is present through selective details.

#### **Trinity Window, Abingdon School Chapel**

In recent years Mynheer has worked in glass as well as other media, including a series of windows for Abingdon

School Chapel.

The strength of Mynheer's work is obvious. It is an accessible, fresh and striking reworking of familiar Christian images. His early training in design and work in advertising has clearly lent its influence here. The question is whether the dark, disordered side of human life, so prevalent in our time and reflected in so much art at least of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is fully taken into account.

### **The Harvest**

Mynheer has written about this.

The Harvest picture is an example of the growing influence of the countryside in my paintings. I see this as a Deposition. The basket of apples represents Christ as the fruit of the tree.

The basket is being received by a figure (possibly his mother) whilst the figure lower right reaches to pick up a fallen apple (she represents Eve). The three trees are the crosses and the one to the left has a few fruit on (the Good thief). The two ploughed fields represent the tearing of the Temple curtain.

### **Mark Cazalet, 1944**

#### **Raising of Lazarus**

#### **Angels in Peckham**

#### **Mr and Mrs Hosea**

Mark Cazalet was educated at Stowe and then Falmouth College of Art, and his work has been shown in a number of exhibitions. He is capable of painting in a range of different styles and indeed it is possible to see the influence of a variety of different artists in the work he has done, Iconic, Spencer and Roualt, for example.

### **Everyday Epiphany III**

In contrast to Nicholas Mynheer Cazalet does not confine himself to Biblical subjects and does not like the description "Christian Artist", for he would want to say that even when painting other subjects, there can be a religious response. He also likes to involve others, schools and communities in producing a work of art together. He is, I think, at his strongest and most original in his cityscapes, as in this epiphany and in this study of gasholders.

### **Kensal Rise Gasholders, Sunrise, Midday and Evening**

#### **West London Stations of the Cross**

#### **Veronica's Veil**

#### **Jesus Condemned**

Not surprisingly, but very effectively, he has sought to set the story of Jesus in this city setting as in his series of the Stations of the Cross. Whilst believing that the Bible expresses timeless truths, he thinks they come alive for us by giving them a contemporary setting.

### **Jesus's childhood at Nazareth**

#### **Three Johannine Miracles, The Blind Man**

However, he thinks that Christianity is essentially a hidden and oblique exercise, and this should be reflected in art by Christian artists. Artists are prophets and seers on the edge of things suggesting a different way of seeing and understanding life.

### **Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane**

#### **The Tree of Life, Chelmsford Cathedral**

#### **The Cross of the Nations, Doha, Qatar**

#### **Altar Frontal, Holy Trinity, Bosham**

#### **Notting Hill Carnival, St Clement, Notting Hill**

Cazalet works in a range of materials, textiles, glass, and mosaic as well as painting. He has received a good number of commissions for churches, in which these different media have been used in a way which both responds to what is desired by the commissioner and the liturgical setting.

### **Judas**

#### **Christ's Entry into Jerusalem**

Although fully conscious that there is no "symbolic order" that unites our society, and that the old images have lost their freshness he is optimistic that there are fresh ways of treating the themes that can break through to people's feelings. (The influence of Anna Maria Pachco here?)

### **Charles Lutyens, 1933**

#### **Fire Angel Mosaic, 1968**

Charles Lutyens studied at the Chelsea, Slade, St Martin's and Central Schools of Art in London and later in Paris. Though mainly a painter he has worked in a range of media and has exhibited widely. From 1963 to 1968 he worked on a commission to produce a mosaic mural of "Angels of the Heavenly Host" on the four long panels high above and surrounding the congregation and altar of St Paul's Bow, with light flooding down from the large lantern on top. At 800 square feet it is almost certainly the largest contemporary mural in the British Isles. Lutyens was commissioned by the architects of the church because they thought his work consistently revealed "a feeling for states of mind or spirit." They thought that as we do not know what angels look like it was important that the work be not too representational and as they put it, they thought the work had achieved

just the right balance “between the figurative and the abstract, between severity and empathy, between assertiveness and recession.”<sup>[7]</sup> Mainly a portrait and landscape painter, Lutyens has turned to Christian themes from time to time as in this recently exhibited *The Mocking*, 1968. What is interesting about this is the way the tormentors hide behind a great sheet as though they do not want to see what they are doing.

### **Outraged Christ**

The highlight of a recent exhibition, however, was a work which has also just been completed and was on view for the first time. This is the much larger than life, in fact 15' *Outraged Christ*, made of carved and recycled timber shaped in the form of slats. The first Christians liked to show Christ victorious on the cross. The Mediaeval period focussed on his suffering for the sins of the world. The 20<sup>th</sup> century too focussed almost exclusively on the suffering of Christ but more often than not as a paradigm of the suffering of a terrible century with its innumerable victims.

### **The Outraged Christ.**

The depiction of an outraged Christ is, so far as I know, a fresh addition to Christian iconography. It is a moving, impressive work. Instead of Christ being shown battered or anguished, it depicts him with mouth open, slightly to one side, with his knees pushing forward from the cross, in rage. But here is rage, indeed fury, not just at what is being inflicted on him but at what we humans do to one another.

### **Roger Wagner, 1957**

#### **Ash Wednesday, 1982**

Roger Wagner read English at Oxford, where he obtained a First, then studied art at the Royal Academy. His work is totally unlike any other modern artist working on Christian themes, being on the one hand painstakingly old fashioned in its sheer artistic skill-he can spend a year or more on a painting- and surrealistically modern, in its mythopoeic powers. It is interesting that of modern painters the biggest influence has been de Chirico, even though he does not usually respond to surrealism. He saw an exhibition of his in Venice when he was at school and it affected him deeply. The colour, energy and empty spaces gave a sense of strangeness that made him see the poetry in painting. Whilst he admires Picasso's talent and virtuosity, the only painting to which he responds is *Guernico*, which he regards as a great work. As far as modern painters depicting Christian themes, he tends to admire individual works rather than a whole oeuvre. For example, Graham Sutherland's early crucifixions rather than his work in Coventry Cathedral.<sup>[8]</sup>

In addition to his painting Wagner is both a poet and someone who has learned Hebrew, and a major feature of his output is his fresh translation of the Psalms published in limited editions with his own woodcuts. Although the emphasis of his work is sometimes on the visual and sometimes on the literary, in fact they seem to interact all the time. Take for example *Ash Wednesday, 1982*, which both has a surrealistic feel and immediately brings to mind the opening lines the poem of that name by T.S. Eliot.

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper- tree  
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety  
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained  
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said  
Shall these bones live? Shall these  
Bones live?

We can see from this that Roger, not surprisingly, has a highly visual literary imagination. It is not surprising therefore that he also reads, and therefore paints, the biblical stories in a highly visual way, which is at once old fashioned and surreal for they are always set in a contemporary setting, and have a contemporary meaning, as we see in *Walking on Water, 1995*. Roger is also an accomplished poet, and sometimes he has written a poem to go with a painting.

*'Lord if it is you' Peter replied  
'tell me to come to you on the water.'  
'Come' he said. Matthew 6v27*

To step out of ourselves on to that sea  
Forsaking every safety that we know  
Becoming for one moment wholly free  
That in that moment endless trust may grow.  
To step into that love which calls us out  
From all evasions of one central choice  
Besieged by winds of fear and waves of doubt  
Yet summoned by that everlasting voice.  
To walk on water in astonished joy  
Towards those outstretched arms which draw us near,  
Then caught by winds which threaten to destroy  
We sink into the waters of our fear.  
Yet underneath all fears and false alarms  
Are sinking, held, by everlasting arms.

## **Walking on Water II**

When it is pointed out that his method of painting biblical scenes against a contemporary background is what all the great artists in the past have done, he said that he had never been drawn to be an archaeological painter, trying to imagine the past. Nor was it simply a question of making recreating the scene. Rather, it was more a question of seeing the contemporary burgeoning with a biblical element. Rembrandt is an example here, for you do not know if the scene is biblical or contemporary. It is this which gives depth and meaning to the painting. He mentions Tobias Jones, who when he paints a wall leaves the impression that there is something mysterious and important behind it. Here we have a clear contemporary setting.

## **Oak Tree, 1995**

Wagner does many studies of Poplar's on Port Meadow in Oxford which, as his poem on one of them indicates, he sees in mystical terms.

*He makes winds his angels  
His servants flames of fire Psalm 104v4*

Who hears the ocean roaring in a tree  
That rustles like a thousand angels wings  
And feels the rising wind he cannot see,  
Is seeing to the burning heart of things.  
For as a book has pages stamped with ink  
While yet some meaning rustles all its leaves,  
So all things are as words that forge a link  
Between the writer and the one who reads.  
And that exulting love which made all things  
Whose laughter is the ocean in a tree  
that rustles like a thousand angels' wings  
Stirred by a wind no human eye can see,  
Breathes love into a world he would inspire  
In winds that flame with Pentecostal fire.

## **There is a River**

He has done a series on Job, and also as mentioned, has produced a series of books on the Psalms. The strong biblical images occasionally with a Renaissance feel as here, entered his being via Italian Renaissance paintings that hung on the walls of his parent's home-part of the collection of his uncle, Henry Wagner, who donated many of them to the National Gallery.

This is an illustration of for his translation of Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,  
Though its waters roar and foam  
and the mountains quake with their surging.  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy place where the Most High dwells.  
God is within her, she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.  
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.  
The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.  
Selah Come and see the works of the LORD,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,  
he burns the shields with fire.  
"Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth."  
The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Perhaps the first major painting of Wagner to catch the eye was The Harvest is the end of the World; and the reapers are angels. 1989, Matthew 13, 39. There is no better comment on it again than the poem he himself wrote.

I saw the cherubim one summer's night  
Reaping it seemed a field of endless wheat.



I heard their voices through the fading light  
Wild, strange and yet intolerably sweet.  
The hour such beauty first was born on earth  
The dawn of judgement had that hour begun  
For some would not endure love's second birth  
Preferring their own darkness to that sun.  
And still love's sun must rise upon our night  
For nothing can be hidden from its heat;  
And in that summer evening's fading light  
I saw his angels gather in the wheat:  
Like beaten gold their beauty smote the air  
And tongues of flame were streaming in their hair.

### **Close up of Angel**

As we might expect Roger Wagner has been acutely aware of the challenge presented by modern art to artists who want to explore Christian themes and has written thoughtfully about it.<sup>[9]</sup> But he did not deliberately set out to meet that challenge, rather he refers to Kenneth Clark saying that when he read something he had written earlier he recognised his own voice. He says his own style and subject matter emerged out of himself. He first recognised his own voice in his angels reaping, having been dissatisfied with the first attempt as well as the first attempt at the Menorah, where he could see what he was trying to do but had not done it. In the later version he said he had achieved what he had set out to do. Asked about its contrariness compared to the current zeitgeist, he says he has never taken the slightest notice of the zeitgeist. He likes paintings which convey a sense of a country where he is not quite sure where he is.

### **Menorah, 1983, Ashmolean, hanging in St Giles, Oxford**

A commentary on this painting can be found in *The Passion in Art*<sup>[10]</sup> but here are Roger's own words on it. The Menorah is the seven branched candlestick 'with cups made like almond-blossoms ...the whole of it one beaten work of pure gold', which in the Book of Exodus Moses is instructed to place in the Tabernacle in front of the Holy of Holies: the place where God's presence dwells with his people. The Menorah thus becomes a kind of visible symbol of God's invisible presence. When the Temple in Jerusalem was finally destroyed the Menorah was among the treasures carted off to Rome, and a depiction of it can be seen among the reliefs on the arch of Titus. Throughout the Bible though the Menorah also appears in prophetic dreams and visions, and its last mention, in the New Testament, comes in the Book of Revelation where Jesus is seen walking in the midst of the seven candlesticks 'his hair white as wool, white as snow, and his eyes as a flame of fire'.

When I first saw Didcot power station through the window of a train from Oxford to Paddington, the smoke belching from the central chimney reminded me more of a crematorium than a symbol of God's presence. And yet having said that, the astonishing sky behind the towers looked like the arch of some great cathedral, while something in the scale of the cooling towers themselves, with the light moving across them and the steam slowly, elegiacally, drifting away, created the impression that they were somehow the backdrop of a great religious drama. Both these ideas remained in my mind for many years, and developed in a series of paintings and sketches. On the one hand the crematorium-like chimney and the inhuman scale of the buildings brought associations with the industrial genocide of the twentieth century and the blank inhumanity of so much in human existence while on the other hand within the strange beauty of the scene was the insistent sense of some great redemptive moment. It wasn't until I realised that the towers, from the angle I had seen them, had lined up to form the shape of the Menorah, that I realised how these two impressions could be united, and realised that the drama to which they were the backdrop must be the drama of the crucifixion. In no other religious event is the absence of God so closely linked with his presence, or the tragedy of human life so intimately linked with its redemption. The extraordinary Jewish prophecies which see in the mysterious servant of the Lord, a figure apparently 'smitten by God and afflicted' but in reality 'pierced for our transgressions', say of him 'surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'. Likewise the disciples of Jesus who see the crucifixion as the fulfilment of these prophecies, describe him both as a man crying out 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', and as one who, even before his birth was named by the angel as 'Immanuel, that is "God with us" '.

### **The Road to Emmaus**

Of late there seems to have been an emphasis in his paintings on the fact that Christianity is essentially a hidden affair. Here is the road, but we have to look hard to find the supper room.

### **Abraham and the Angels, 1995**

The story in Genesis of Abraham offering hospitality to three strangers and discovering they were angels was taken by the church from an early age as a sign of the Trinity, and resulted for example in the wonderful Icon on this theme by Andrei Rublev in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. But the Abraham story is followed by the destruction of the cities of the plain, so here Wagner has set the meal against the background of Sizewell Nuclear Plant. Asked about the way he showed the biblical image as almost hidden against the background, he says that this is the way it was. He pointed out that Breughal did the same, though he himself had done this independently.

### **Abraham and the Angels, 2002**

After a trip to Syria some years later a number of his painting were given a Syrian background, and the one here

features the meal in close up, reflecting the hospitality of the Bedouin, against the background of a cement factory indicating the destruction of Sodom and Gomorah.

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- [1] Pamela Tudor Craig (Lady Wedgewood) Icons of the Invisible God; Selected sculptures of Peter Eugene Ball, Chevron, 1999, p.8
- [2] A very positive response to the work was given in an article by Tom Devonshire Jones in the "Church Times, 14, October, 2008
- [3] Judged by the painting exhibited and reproduced in Images of Christ, St Matthews, Northampton, 1993, p.49
- [4] Imaging the Invisible: The Art of Iain McKillop 2010 available via his website
- [5] Andrew Lambirth, in Cross Purposes, ed. Nathaniel Hepburn, Mascalls Gallery, Ben Uri, London Jewish Museum, , 2010, p.65
- [6] Maggi Hambling: Good Friday Gainsborough House, Sudbury and the Bible Society, 2000 with essays by Andrew Lambirth and Tom Devonshire Jones
- [7] Charles Lutyens: Being in the World, paintings, drawings, sculptures, mosaic [info@charleslutyens.co.uk](mailto:info@charleslutyens.co.uk), 2011,p.64
- [8] Interview with the author.
- [9] Roger Wagner, "Art and Faith" in Public Life and the Place of the Church: Reflections to honour the Bishop of Oxford, ed. Michael Brierly, Ashgate, 2006, p.133 but see the whole chapter
- [10] Richard Harries, The Passion in Art, Ashgate, 2004, p.134ff