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Modern Art in Churches Transcript

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In my book, "The Image of Christ in Art", I treat artists in a chronological manner from the German expressionists up to the present day. This talk takes a sub-theme of the book. It is not the same one as I gave at Barnard's Inn Hall a few weeks ago - it takes a sub-theme, and it is focusing only on those works of art which have been commissioned and appear in cathedrals or churches. So, I am not including, in this lecture, images that are in private collections or in museums.

This is Walter Hussey, a very fine portrait by his friend Graham Sutherland. Walter Hussey was vicar of St Matthew's Northampton. He had not got a lot of money and he had no connections when he started, but he did have a fine eye and a fine ear, and he had what the Jewish people call Chutzpah. He simply wrote to Benjamin Britten, c/o the BBC, the way one does. The BBC forwarded it on to his musical agent, who wrote back a very snooty letter saying, of course, Mr Britten's far too busy to answer you, etc. etc. He was very pleased, a couple of weeks later, to get a letter from Benjamin Britten himself saying: "You are right to tell me you have a bee in your bonnet about re-connecting the arts and the church. I write to tell you so have I - I would love to write some music for you." From that came "Rejoice with the Lamb". He wrote in a similar way to Bernstein and to Walton, and had great musical pieces in his parish church. He went down to London once and he saw those wonderful drawings of Henry Moore and he said, "That is the man for me."

Henry Moore was very, very reticent, first of all, about doing anything for the Church because he thought that works of art in church had basically gone dead and that there was no living tradition. But, eventually, with the encouragement of Walter Hussey, he tackled this "Madonna and Child" and, by the end, he was very pleased with it. He felt, as he put it, he had "felt himself back into the tradition", and his purpose was not just to do a mother and child but to make something different, a Madonna and child, and he felt that he had achieved that.

I am going to deliberately leave some of the images on for a few seconds without me talking, so that you can really look at them. Others, I will skip over more quickly.

Later on, he was asked to do this stone altar for St Stephen's Walbrook, commissioned by Chad Varah, the founder of the Samaritans. It was a highly controversial piece, and it had to go to the highest ecclesiastical court in the land, called the Court of Ecclesiastical Causes Reserved. They eventually gave permission for this stone altar.

Another work which you can see in London of Henry Moore's is in St Paul's Cathedral, a much more abstract version of a Madonna and Child...

After Henry Moore, Walter Hussey decided that he would like some work by Graham Sutherland. Graham Sutherland had really discovered himself as a painter painting in Pembrokeshire, but he was not interested in doing just ordinary landscapes. He liked to focus on details, and he became obsessed with the thorn, and I show this for obvious reasons...

This is "The Crucifixion" he did for St Matthew's Northampton. He particularly asked Walter Hussey whether he could do a crucifixion. He took a long time coming to realise or understand how he wanted to approach it, and in the end, it was seeing those terribly emaciated bodies coming out of Belsen that finally, as it were, triggered this depiction.

Also, like so many artists of the time, he was hugely influenced by Grunewald's "Crucifixion".

Many people, however, feel that Graham Sutherland's most successful depiction of the crucifixion is this one, in the Roman Catholic Church of St Aidan's in East Acton in London. It absolutely dominates the west wall.

But then, as you know, Graham Sutherland was commissioned to do this great tapestry, in the east end of Coventry Cathedral. It took something like ten years in the making. It is a Christ in Majesty. Many of you will have seen it. I wonder what your reaction to it is. My own view is that, in some ways, it succeeds, and, in other ways, it does not quite succeed. What I do think succeeded in that tapestry were the four images and symbols of the evangelists. There, for instance, is St Mark.

Walter Hussey, who is the seminal influence in religious art in England today, if there has been a revival of religious art over the last 50 or 60 years, as I believe there has, and it is part of the argument of my book that there has, it is more than anything else due to Walter Hussey because he went on from St Matthew's Northampton to be Dean of Chichester, and this is one of the works he commissioned for Chichester, "Noli me tangere", "Do not touch me", those famous words of the risen Christ to Mary.

As you can see, it is a very modernist depiction, if you contrast it with all the great fifteenth and sixteenth century depictions by Titian and so on, but it is a work I think which succeeds extraordinarily well.

Now, the other major figure around at that time was Jacob Epstein. This is his first major church commission. It is "Christ in Majesty" at Llandaff Cathedral. I myself feel that the concrete arch on which the Christ stands does not quite work in that ancient building, though I think the "Christ in Majesty", when you come up close, does.

Jacob Epstein was brought up in a very devout Jewish family in New York, but he turned away from his Judaism. Nevertheless, the Bible went very deeply into him, and he was particularly drawn to do Christian works of art.

He did this for Coventry Cathedral, and, again, many of you will have seen this. This is one of his more conventional depictions, if you like. It stands on the outside of the Cathedral, very arresting, very powerful, and very accessible.

But in the bomb ruins of the old Cathedral, you will find this "Ecce Homo"...

Jacob Epstein made his living with his highly successful bronze portraits of famous people, and also people who are not so famous, but his real emotional artistic energy was in his carving, and he was particularly influenced by African carving. He had the best collection of African carving in the country at that time. His carving was extremely controversial. If you want to see some of his early carving, go to St James's Park Underground Station and start looking around and you will see some of his early carving.

Some of his carving in this style was so controversial that, believe it or not, it was bought up by a man to be shown in Blackpool peep-show for a penny a time - it is unbelievable!

This, of course, aroused total vilification when it came out in 1922, absolute horror, derision, vilification. We think that modern art arouses outrage today - nothing compared with the kind of outrage that it aroused in the 1920s and '30s. There was no buyer for this of course at the time, but thank God, literally, it was donated by his widow, Kathleen Epstein, to Coventry Cathedral on Jacob's death, and there it stands, perfectly set in the ruins of the old Cathedral, a strong, implacable Christ, standing firm even in the midst of that bombed ruin.

This is his depiction of Lazarus. It can be found in the antechapel of New College Oxford. It is a very powerful work, as well as a very accessible work, again totally different from the usual scenes of the raising of Lazarus. This focuses simply on Lazarus, the moment he is, as it were, being woken up into this life and looking back on what he had seen the other side of death.

Now, the other great artist to have emerged at that time, as a result of the influence of Walter Hassey, and through John Betjeman, was John Piper. The first work he did was windows for Oundle School Chapel, but his best work at that stage was this, which, again, many of you will have seen. It is the Baptistry Chapel in Coventry Cathedral, extraordinarily powerful, almost overwhelming, in its impact of sheer glory.

Walter Hassey, again, commissioned John Piper to do this reredos of the Holy Trinity for Chichester Cathedral.

John Piper did innumerable windows in churches around and about the country. This is a section of his Benjamin Britten memorial window at Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

John Piper had a very interesting trajectory because he was, almost more than anybody, at the cutting edge of modern art in the 1920s and '30s, but he significantly changed his style to make, in some ways, more representative or more figurative, without losing that modernist touch, and he was hugely influenced by medieval stained glass. He said that copying a little section of thirteenth century glass was the biggest influence of anything else on his artistic life. He came into his own in his church windows.

This is, I think, my favourite one of his, which is in St Mary's Iffley, just outside Oxford. It is the animal song of the Nativity, a totally charming, wonderfully evocative and colourful window.

It was not only the Anglican Church that these artists were commissioned to do things for. This is the lantern in the great Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool by John Piper.

Another artist at that time, who is perhaps not as well-known now as the ones I have considered so far, was Ceri Richards. This was the Sacrament Chapel for that Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool, and what I think this shows is that, in the right context, even severely abstract art can work, because the art here is very, very abstract but it really works in that Sacrament Chapel, the combination of that backdrop to the altar and the light, and the windows and the light coming through the windows.

Ceri Richards also did other windows. This is one in Derby Cathedral.

This is one of my favourite paintings. It is in the Chapel of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, the "Supper at Emmaus". I think it is very powerful the way Christ is emerging from the gold background of the cross. He is half there and half not there, and the two almost yokel-like figures of the followers of Jesus are there in combination of bewilderment and stunned awe. Believe it or not, this was commissioned by the Junior Common Room of the College. I wonder whether that could happen today? Three cheers for the Junior Common Room at that time!

This is a less well-known painting of Ceri Richards and deserves to be better known. It is the "Deposition" and it is in St Mary's Swansea. It is a very modernist picture. The dead body of Jesus is lying on a plain sheet in perhaps Swansea High Street, a certain amount of debris around...

Walter Hussey, Chichester Cathedral, and the other great name from that period of the twentieth century, Marc Chagall. Marc Chagall, another Jewish artist of course, who loved to depict Christian themes, and was commissioned to do a great number of windows, both in Germany after the War and in this country. This is Psalm 150 in Chichester Cathedral.

This is the east window of Tudeley Parish Church, not far from Tunbridge Wells in Kent. I hope that there are a few of you here who will have been to Tudeley. There was a sad accident and the 21 year old daughter of the family who lived in the big house was drowned in a sailing accident, and they commissioned Marc Chagall to do the east window, and in the east window, there is the figure of Christ on the cross, but underneath, there is the daughter being drowned and then the daughter riding on her favourite horse in front of the crucifix.

When Chagall came for the unveiling and the blessing of that window, he was so struck by the space inside that he offered to do all the other windows in the church free, and if you go into that church today, outside, it is totally unprepossessing, small, unprepossessing, undistinguished. Inside, it is a heaven of blues and yellows and oranges of Chagall at his best. Chagall had very much a strongly mystical Jewish feel for life and made him ideally suited for many church commissions.

This is an unusual one, Cecil Collins, again Chichester Cathedral, Walter Hussey – this is the altarpiece of the great sun on the altar frontal of Chichester Cathedral.

On the staff of Chichester Cathedral, later, was actually a friend of mine called Keith Walker, whom I know is a great devotee of Cecil Collins. When he left there to become vicar of All Saints' Basingstoke, a very ordinary kind of parish church, he commissioned Cecil Collins to do, first of all, this window, and then, also in the same church, these side windows of the angels, with a quote based upon a Sufi idea of the eye of the heart, a lovely idea, the eye of the heart...

Keith Walker at All Saints' Basingstoke not only commissioned Cecil Collins, he also commissioned Elisabeth Frink to do this head of Christ. It just shows what can be done in an ordinary parish church to get the very, very best art of the time, if somebody actually believes in it.

Also on the theme of Elisabeth Frink, she did this "Walking Madonna", which many of you will have seen, outside Salisbury Cathedral. She said she deliberately wanted to do the Madonna in later life, as a vigorous lady, striding forward.

And just before she died, Elisabeth Frink did this "Risen Christ" for Liverpool Cathedral. It is not easy to see below because it is set very, very high.

This is a close-up of it. It is above the west door when you arrive.

There are a number of works of art in Liverpool Cathedral. This, you will recognise, is a Craigie Aitchison. Craigie Aitchison, all his life, painted crucifixions, either a single crucifix or three, as here, very often with his little Bedlam Terrier. It is a great mystery as to why he painting crucifixions. Nobody has quite got to the bottom of it. He never really revealed, but it was clearly hugely, hugely important to him. Craigie Aitchesons are very accessible and very popular with the general public, and there are two or three of them in churches. There is one, for instance, in I think it is Truro.

This is not by a well-known person, but it is one I very much love. It is by a lady called Hildegart Nicholas, who was Swedish by origin and a designer by training, and after a visit to Ravenna, she took up mosaic work. She used to do smaller mosaics, with literally hundreds of thousands of tiny splinters of glass. She was commissioned to do this for the Chapel of the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. I find it, though simple, extraordinarily powerful, the combination of the thin, delicate, brittle wooden cross, against the background of the gold, a broken circle, but nevertheless an enclosing circle.

I also very much like this one by Hildegart Nicholas, which was commissioned for the Chapel of the Bournemouth General Hospital. This is "The Prodigal", but it's not the usual prodigal, as you can see there, it

is the heavenly Father gathering the Son.

This is part of a "Stations of the Cross" of the Church of Our Lady in Milton Keynes, done in ceramic, by Norman Adams.

But this was his most important and powerful "Stations of the Cross", which is in St Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Mulberry Street in Manchester.

Norman Adams, who was a distinguished academician of the Royal Academy, and was Keeper of the Royal Academy for many years, was best known in his lifetime for his landscapes of Yorkshire and of the Outer Hebrides, and if you look on his website, you will see that most of his works that are depicted, are there, are of that character. But, particularly towards the end of his life, he began to focus more on religious themes, and, not long ago, there was the first exhibition, in Guildford Cathedral, of some of his so far unexhibited religious paintings, and very powerful they are, and apparently there is a great cache of them in his old home and studio in Yorkshire, and I think we will be hearing more about him in the years to come.

But this Station 10, which my wife and I saw at the Royal Academy about 25 years ago, before they went up to Manchester, and totally bowled us over, Norman Adams said it was the most important work he had done and I can well believe that.

These are two works that I have shown by Peter Ball, both in Winchester Cathedral. That is the Pieta, and that is the Crucifixion. He calls it the Crucifixion, but of course also it could be a Christ Ascended or Christ in Glory. You can see there, he is clearly using resonances of Romanesque style and Celtic art, but it is not mere pastiche. It is one of the examples I think of successful immersion and use of tradition in order to revive modern art.

Winchester Cathedral have been in the forefront of commissioning good works of modern art and those, Peter Ball's, are just one example of the work which they have commissioned.

This is something very different. He died just a couple of weeks ago, Sir Anthony Caro, but I suppose, more than anybody else, would be regarded as at the cutting edge of modern art. He switched from fairly conventional sculpture, a la Henry Moore, started to use great pieces of industrial waste, but it was hugely respected in the art world. This is a work of his commissioned by Christ College Cambridge. You can see it there - it is another Deposition. He did a number of Depositions, copying, or based on the tradition of people like Rubens and Rembrandt, but this is one which stands, as it were, in its own right, though clearly influenced by tradition.

I think what this brings out, whether you like this work or not, and this is one of the arguments of my book, and that is that modern art has actually, despite everything, turned out to be a great friend, rather than an enemy, of Christian art. The more I wrote that book, the more convinced I became that modern art, which arouses so much, or has aroused so much hostility, and people see it as inimical to religious art, has actually turned out to be the friend of religious art.

Anyway, that is something at the cutting edge of modern art by Sir Anthony Caro.

This is a more accessible piece, which you may very well have seen, by Shirazeh Houshiary. It is in St Martin in the Fields, part of their total refurbishment and revamp, in the most wonderful way. You can see that it is very accessible, in a way. It is abstract, and yet there is a clear hint of the cross. There is something almost egg-shaped in the middle, which is a giving birth, a resurrection, an expansion there, but it is nicely non-symmetrical, so there is a life and a giving forth from it, which is very effective. So, that is another example, I think, of where a work of art, however abstract, or semi-abstract, can actually work in a Christian context.

Here is one of a group of artists, very, very prolific today - this is Mark Cazelet. He has done a lot of work in churches, in a variety of different media. This is his flowering tree or "Tree of Life" in Chelmsford Cathedral.

Another artist who belonged to that group, Nicholas Mynheer, this is his depiction of two angels for the Aumbry of St Mary's Iffley.

And this is also in St Mary's Iffley - it is "The Flowering Tree" by Roger Wagner...

This window is beautifully placed, in St Mary's Iffley, which, if you do not know it, it is really worth a visit. It is a wonderful twelfth century church, with a lot of its original twelfth century carving there, but it has that John Piper window, it has this Roger Wagner window, and it has the Nicholas Mynheer, angels guarding the Aumbry, and they are also commissioning a new font covering soon.

Some of you, I think, might possibly have been to the kind of day I did, whenever it was, at Barnard's Inn Hall, with Roger Wagner, when he talked about being a modern artist. Roger Wagner is an extraordinarily talented person. He is a good poet. He read English at Oxford and then, after art school, also taught himself

Hebrew. He has done a wonderful version of the Psalms with his own translation of the Psalms, together with his own drawings in it. He has a meticulous painter, can sometimes spend a year over a painting, but he is also very, very thoughtful, and, in the book, I quote some of the things he writes about, the challenge of being a Christian artist in a modern context, how to, as it were, stand in the tradition and use the tradition at the same time as being modern.

A person who he feels really close to, I think, is T.S. Eliot, and T. S. Eliot helped to rediscover for us the importance of tradition, not as tradition as something outmoded or antiquarian, but as tradition which enables you, first of all, to see the modern as truly modern, but also which enables one to use it in relation to the modern. Roger Wagner is one of those artists who uses the tradition, but not in order to be antiquarian or to get back to the past, but to bring into the present and, as it were, illuminate the present, and he talks about the number of influences which have gone into this "Tree of Life", not least the great twelfth century "Tree of Life" in San Clemente in Rome. There are quite a lot of his images in my book.

We are coming now towards the end of the images that I am going to show because I am leaving plenty of time for discussion this afternoon. We can go back and look at some of those images you might particularly want to talk about. I would rather do too few than too many, I think, as I have learnt in the past.

This is a very, very recent work of art, commissioned by St Dunstan's Mayfield. It is by one of our best-known modern artists, Maggi Hambling. Maggi Hambling, every Good Friday, paints a depiction of the Crucifixion. Every Good Friday, she spends the whole day focusing on the Crucifixion and painting a different aspect of it every year. Here, she was then able to do something for the Church. Apparently, the verger died and left some money for the Church to commission something, and the Church bravely commissioned a modern work. She is called this "Risen Spirit". It is metal. It hangs above the altar, and when I went down there to open this and she was there, she said, kind of rather ruefully, "Well, at least it is hung high so they will not be able to put gravity on it as they have on my work of art in Aldeburgh." Some of you will know, Aldeburgh, there is that great scallop-shell there, which some people have put some gravity on. I like this "Risen Spirit". It conveys all kind of things: it can be the human spirit rising up; it can be the Holy Spirit, of course, which is usually symbolised by a dove; it can be human aspiration; or it can be a symbol for the risen Christ as well. I think the point about a real work of art, it can be seen in so many different ways...

So, dear friends, I think that is all the images I am going to show as part of this formal thing. Thank you very much indeed. It has been a great pleasure for me to be able to show you these images again. I love looking at them myself, and I hope you have. If anybody wants a signed copy of the book, they are available afterwards, out in the foyer. Thank you.