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**Christian Faith and Modern Art:**

**Searching for New Ways**

Professor The Rt Rvd Lord Harries

Art has always been subject to fashion. During the 20th century however, as a result of the influence of the media those changes have been trumpeted as never before; furthermore, the changes have had an international dimension. So it is that since World War II two of the most talked about styles, Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, originated in the USA. It is vital to remember, however, that what is of immediate interest may not be of long term significance, and more particularly, that British art in this period has been distinguished by a range of individual styles. Frances Spalding, rejecting a view of art history that sees it in terms of a linear progression with one radically new style following another, has written: “Innovation has instead been made through a return to personal convictions or native traditions, to a revival of narrative for example, or a realist approach. The individualism inherent in British art has liberated artists from unthinking adoption of fashionable styles.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

The Tate mounted an exhibition in 1956 on ‘Modern Art in the United States’, with the final gallery devoted to the work of abstract expressionists like Pollock and Rothko. This made a powerful impact in Britain. “But those artists who responded to its challenge did so with varying degrees of enthusiasm, sometimes with an ambivalence that was most clearly voiced in the work of Patrick Heron.” [[2]](#footnote-2) In the same year the impact of Pop Art also began to make itself felt and with a similar ambivalence amongst practising artists in Britain. Then in the mid to late 60’s conceptual art began to make ground as a dominant expression.

“‘Conceptual’ art could take any conceivable form. Its practitioners, reacting against the excessive emphasis previously given to material presence in art, were primarily concerned with ideas and information and only secondarily with their visual presentation.[[3]](#footnote-3)”

That quotation reveals why conceptual art with its emphasis on ideas, could have been an ally to artists working within a religious tradition, who do indeed have an idea to share, but which in fact turns out not to be the case because of what Spalding refers to as conceptual art’s lack of interest in visual presentation. For within the Christian tradition anyway the point of art lies precisely in a particular type of visual presentation.

So with these points in mind, particularly Spalding’s stress on the individualism inherent in British Art which has liberated it from a slavish following of fashion we consider a number of British Artists who made their reputation after World War II and who are no longer living. But first a brief look at an American Artist regarded as one of the great figures of Abstract Expressionism, but who could better be termed a minimalist.

**Barnett Newman( 1905-70)**

**Onement, 1948**

Newman was born into a New York Jewish family and developed a style in which a narrow vertical line, what he called a “zip” remained a constant feature. Although his paintings are severely abstract he used to give them titles, often a Jewish one, such as “Adam and Eve”. This one is called ‘Onement’.

**First Station of the Cross**

**Meditating on the Stations**

**Three of the stations.**

Between 1958 and 1966 he painted a series of stations of the cross, calling them “Lema sabachtani-My God why hast thou forsaken me” which he saw as a memorial to the holocaust. When they were shown he added a fifteenth one. They are now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. There is no similar attempt in Britain to deploy Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism so directly for religious purposes, instead we look to the particular unique style of each artists, though all were of course shaped by the modern movement as a whole.

**Craigie Aitchison( 1926-2009)**

**Photo with Bedlington and its portrait**

Craigie Aitchison was born in Edinburgh in 1926. His father, also Craigie, Sir Craigie Aitchson, was a brilliant K.C. who became a judge and then the first Socialist Advocate of Scotland. Both his parents had some interest in painting. Although Craigie did four years study for the bar he had no heart for it, spending time going to the Tate and learning to copy pictures. So he went instead to study at the Slade, whose emphasis at the time was on meticulous drawing. This was neither Craigie’s interest nor talent and he stood out from the first by producing very different kinds of painting. In the 1950’s he belonged to the young Bohemian artistic set in London, going from one temporary lodging to another. However, he had some success with his painting and was early taken up by a Gallery. He moved into a house in Kennington which he decorated in colourful and eccentric ways, where he lived for the rest of his life with his Bedlington Dogs, which were central to his life.

**Still life with bird vase, 2004**

**Georgeous Macauley in Sou’Wester, 1976**

**Georgeous Macauley in uniform, 1969**

He painted still lifes which he imbued with a lovely tranquil mood, and arresting portraits, particularly of Georgeous George Macaulay whom he liked to paint with unusual headgear.

**Crucifixion, 1994,**

**Crucifixion, 1994.** (Jerwood Prize)

**Crucifixion, 1995** (No arms)

He painted his first crucifixion in 1958 and this continued to be the dominant image of his work for the rest of his life. They were sometimes criticised by art critics for being repetitive but in fact there are very many different variations. He was also criticised from time to time for a naïve childlike style, but in fact it was meticulously contrived and arrived at. He could spend weeks on a painting rubbing elements out, and changing them before he became even moderately satisfied. What he was primarily concerned to do was achieve a certain surface effect. He was concerned with the form of the painting, and in particular people were drawn to his use of colour in creating certain moods. He did no drawing of outlines but painted straight on the canvas with great blocks of roughly textured colour. He much admired the formalism of Mondrian

Yet, although he was primarily concerned with the formal element of a painting the fact is that it was the crucifix with dominated his imaginative thinking. What did it mean to him? What was he trying to say? The short answer is that we do not know. The one major study on Aitchison has the words “It has to be said he is unusually reticent on the subject, content to tell the curious how he considers the crucifixion “the most horrific story I have ever heard” and little more…”They are ganging up against one person. As long as the world exists one should attempt to record that. It was so unfair”[[4]](#footnote-4) He was not a regular church goer. However, his grandfather had been a distinguished Minister in the United Free Church in Scotland, and his parents took him to a variety of churches when he was growing up in Edinburgh, including Roman Catholic ones, so the image obviously went in early and went in deep. In addition Craigie Aitchison had some time in Italy as a young man and the painters of the *Trecento and Quattrocento* had a profound effect on him, especially Piero della Fransesca whose influence we can see not only in his crucifixes but in his sideways profile portraits. There is also something of the simple devotion of Fra Angelico in Aitchison’s work. That said, all we can do is look at the paintings and let them convey what they will. There is no emphasis on suffering on such, but there is a sense of spiritual isolation, of the lonely individual against the great, sometimes black panorama of nature. Jesus on the cross is often depicted without arms, pinned to wood, which seems to suggest the human being, limited and finite, pinned to the circumstances of his or her life, bound by fate.

**The Tree, 1968**

**Crucifixion 1998**

The sense of spare isolation is further indicated by Aitchison’s depiction of trees, either on their own, or as a feature of his paintings on the crucifixion.

**Crucifixion, 1984**

For the most part there is no other human in these paintings but there is a beloved Bedlington. The Bedlington, looks somewhat like a sheep, and can bring to mind the image of the lamb of God. Sometimes there are also two birds on the cross bar. Aitchison kept canaries in the house. So this isolated figure has the consolation of the animal world, the affection of his dogs and the song of the birds. Such paintings resonated with the wider public, and at least two Cathedrals felt that they were saying something important. Truro Cathedral commissioned a Triptych, and Liverpool’s Anglican Cathedral, a crucifix. The Dean of St Paul’s at the time wanted to buy a crucifixion for the Cathedral but this was vetoed by other members of the chapter. The Dean wrote of the Crucifxion, now in the Tate Gallery “Here, the divine is vulnerable and disturbing, not almighty or ecclesiastical. As in some Eastern religious thinking, he divine is seen to be at one with nature, the birds and the beasts, suffering with suffering humanity.” And a colleague on the chapter noted that Craigie’s crucifixions “reflect what was is stirring in the hidden subconscious of his generation.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Goatfell, Isle of Arran, 1993**

**Holy Island, 2001**

The other paintings of Aitchison which seem to have a religious feel about them are the ones he did towards the end of his life of the Isle of Arran in the Forth of Clyde, and Holy Island, just off its coast. This was where he spent his childhood holidays with his parents and where his parents ashes were buried. Holy Island now has a community of Buddhist monks on it.

**Elizabeth Frink, (1930-1993)**

Elizabeth Frink was educated at Guildford and Chelsea art schools. She developed a technique, following Giocometti, of building up figures in plaster, from which she later makes a bronze. She was one of a group of British artists who exhibited at the 1952 Venice Bienalle and whose work was characterised by Herbert Read as ‘The Geometry of Fear’, a title which reflected both the atmosphere of the Cold War and the growing awareness of the horrors of the holocaust. Some of her work then, and later when she was very conscious of the oppression in the world reflects the menacing side of humanity in her male heads. But she witnesses to the victims in heads of a gentler aspect. She was brought up in the country and had a great affinity with animals, and it was their relationship with humanity that concerned her and which is reflected in his sculpture. Her work was summed up in the Times obituary as concerned with the “horseness” of horses, the human figure and the divine in the human. She was widely acclaimed in her lifetime and was kept very busy with commissions. Brought up as a Roman Catholic she admitted to strong views about Catholicism.[[6]](#footnote-6) She was drawn to Christ, one reason being it enabled her to explore the male body, her main theme, in various forms. So we have her ‘Head of Christ, 1951’,and ‘Head of Christ 1983’,and ‘Head of Christ, All Saints, Basingstoke, 1986’which reflects both the strength and vulnerability, she sees in him .She has also focussed on the passion story. ‘Pieta, 1956, Methodist Art Collection’. ‘Crucifix, St Mary’s Lutheran Church, London, 1983’ (plaster sculpture for bronze original). ‘Crucifix, 1966’.‘Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool’ .She received a number of commissions on other themes as well. ‘Eagle Lectern, Coventry Cathedral, 1962’, (Architects Copy). ‘St Edmund, 1966, Courtyard of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Cathedral’.One was for a ‘Walking Madonna, Salisbury Cathedral’.She deliberately decided not to do a Madona and Bambino and has said she wanted to depict the Madonna when her children and grown up and left home.[[7]](#footnote-7) She was commissioned to do a statue of ‘The Risen Christ, 1966, Our Lady of the Wayside, Roman Catholic Church of Shirley, Solihul’.Dominating the churchit depicts the risen Christ showing his five wounds to his disciples. It is said that if you look from the left you see the beard and Semitic features accentuated, from the right, the Greek ones, so he looks more like Appollo. The New Testament of course brings together both perspectives in its understanding of Christ. Her best know church commission was “Risen Christ”for Liverpool Cathedral, which she was able to see installed just before her death. She had suffered a number of bouts of cancer over the years and worked on this in her final illness. We may have doubts over its position, high above the West Door of the monumental building by Giles Gilbert Scott, but presumably as she saw it in place, Frink herself approved of this setting. The foreshortened limbs, and the green patina of the bronze against the orange red sandstone have led to it being described as alien, and lacking a sense of triumph by someone very familiar with it, though they believe the head does have this sense of resurrection.

**F.N.Souza, 1924-2002**

**Head of Christ, 1948**

Francis Souza was born in Goa. His father died when he was young, and he himself caught small pox. His mother vowed that if he survived she would dedicate him to the priesthood. He was given the extra name Francis in honour of the patron saint of Goa, St Francis Xavier and was sent to a prestigious Jesuit school of that name. He was expelled from there and then from his art college, from that latter for supporting the “Quit India” movement. He founded a progressive artists movement in India in order to latch into the international movement but then came to Britain where in due course his paintings and writing achieved some recognition. There is an erotic element in much of his art. In 2008 one of his paintings sold for the highest ever painting by an Indian on the international market. Eventually he moved to New York. Brought up as a Roman Catholic he acknowledged the Roman Catholic church to be a very big influence on him especially in his early years and he produced a number of paintings on Christian themes in an expressionists style but one also influenced by the Art Brut movement of the time and which also owed something to the very ambivalent feelings he had about the church. In this ‘Head of Christ, 1948’is reflected the great impression and appeal the figure of Christ had for him, with its Byzantine elements. In ‘Crucifixion,1959’we see his ambivalence. His reaction to the blond hair and blue eyes of Western depictions, the emphasis on violence and cruelty.‘St Francis, 1961’in which is reflected greater serenity, as there is in, which also brings out the point made by John Berger that there was an eclectic element in his style.

**Two Saints in a landscape, 1961**

**The Paraclete, 1962**.

**The Crucifixion, 1962**

**John Reilly (1928-2010)**

**Cain and Abel**

John Reilly trained at Kingston Art College from 1949-52, and having been brought up to love sailing he initially painted marine subjects. Settled in the Isle of Wight, for 30 years he earned his living as a ceramic artist but continued to paint as well, his work gradually gaining recognition. He began to paint full time in 1981. Always interested in Biblical painting, four of his paintings were purchased by the Methodist art collection and in 1964 the BBC made a film about his work. Reilly was not interested in painting the actual scene as it might have been in history. Rather, he wanted to paint it in such a way as to bring out its spiritual significance for all people of all time-the eternal element if you like. Nevertheless, he was a serious Christian believer, and aware therefore of what has been called “the scandal of particularity”, the Christian belief that the Eternal has been specially manifested in one particular person at one particular time. He has developed a particular method for holding these two aspects together, the universal and the particular, the spiritual and the material, the invisible and the visible. He brings out the historical and visible by showing the figures in enclosed self contained spaces. We see this, for example, the particular and the visible in his painting of ‘Cain and Abel’, one of the pictures in the Methodist Collection. At the same time Reilly seeks to indicate the other dimension, the spiritual through flowing, open lines and curves. We can see this here in the way he has painted the fields, hills and sky. We can see it even more in this ‘Raising of Lazarus’.What has happened over the years is that this flowing, harmonious element has become more prominent, dominating the picture, usually taking the form of part or full circles. We see this for example in his ‘Miraculous draught of fishes’.All is drawn into the bright circles of eternity. Not surprisingly the circle has often been used as an image of eternity as in Henry Vaughan’s lines

“I saw eternity the other night

Like a great ring of pure and endless light,

All calm as it was bright.[[8]](#footnote-8)”

As Reilly himself has written: “My paintings are not concerned with the surface appearance of people or things but try to express something of the fundamental spiritual reality behind this surface appearance. I try to express in visible form the oneness and unity of this invisible power binding all things into one whole. [[9]](#footnote-9)”

Again, as he has said, “I am trying to paint the glory of God and through that the meaning of life.”

In short Reilly is interest in the deeper meaning of a scene. Take ‘Daniel and the Lion’s Den’as an example. There is nothing literalistic about this. It is clearly meant to convey the feeling of being under the protection of God even when faced with the lions of existence. This is brought out by the text which he uses, not just the story of Daniel, but words from Psalm 7. “In thee O Lord do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion.” Another theme which has emerged over the years is relating the human figure to the environment, to indicate the natural and human worlds in harmony. We see this in ‘Great Pastures beside still waters’. But above all it is the harmony of earth and heaven, the eternal and the temporal that he wishes to convey, which we see for example ‘Jacob’s Ladder-Vision of Unity’.We note the contrast between the rather stiff, wooden figure at the bottom, and the curved relaxed one above.

Emma Spencer, placing Reilly in the tradition of Christian painting links him first of all with the iconic tradition of the Orthodox church, for whom icons are not so much educative tools as windows into eternity. She also discussed his relationship to painters of the Renaissance, and how on the one hand he, like them, is concerned with particular biblical scenes but on the other how he in no way wants to represent people or events as we see them with the visible eye. Relating Reilly to developments in 20th century art she suggests he has some affinity with both cubism with its multiple views, which for some can indicate another dimension, and fauvism, with its free vivid colours representing a personal vision rather than colours as they are usually depicted. She suggests that these developments have freed Reilly to produce a Biblically based art appropriate to our time. In all these points I think she is substantially correct.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The strengths of Reilly’s works are clear. They are accessible, they are appealing, and they convey a strong spiritual feeling that is fully integrated with the forms he uses. He has used the developments of 20th century art to bring fresh life to old images and done so in a style which is unmistakably his. Having found his artistic voice, he used it in a consistent and effective way.

If we have doubts, it is in the downside of his very strengths. First, a more theological point. His desire to give a universal meaning to the biblical scenes, to see them as a way into a spiritual meaning which we can experience now, tends towards the Platonic rather than the incarnational. Platonism has for most of Christian history been a good friend and ally of Christianity but we have to remember that God is not just the Eternal now, but has become a particular now. Icons of the Orthodox church try to take us in and through the particular now of a biblical person or scene into that Eternal now, but they never lose sight of the fact that we do this in and through the particularity of time and place made manifest in Jesus. Reilly rather depicts the biblical scenes as launching pads out of the particular into the eternal. The second doubt, linked to this, is the way all is taken up into harmony and elegance. This is shown artistically in the way some of his paintings seem too geometrically driven. And the theological point behind this is that the suffering of Jesus on the cross is never a focus. This is in contrast with almost every other artist painting Christian themes at the time for whom it was the suffering of Christ above all that resonated with the terrible suffering of the 20th century. Last year I showed ‘Crucifixion (2)’ as a rare example of an artist who had tried to see the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as part of one saving event, and this is its strength. But it is very far, say from the agony of Christ as depicted by Grunwald on the Issenheim altarpiece. Here is Reilly’s ‘Resurrection’.The dominant motif in both this and the crucifixion is the circle of eternal light into which we are taken up. This is an abiding truth of the Christian faith, but that truth must somehow sit alongside the brutal cruelty of so much human life, which God has taken into himself in the cross of Christ.

**Enzo Plazzotta, 1921-81**

**Crucifixion, 1974**

Plazzotta was born near Venice but spent most of his working life in London. He made his living mainly with bronzes of horses, but many of his sculptures, attractive moving figures, appear on the streets of London. He also worked with Christian themes.

**John Hayward, 1929-2000**

**The Baptism of Christ**

**Jacob’s Ladder**

John Hayward had more than 230 windows or church interiors to his credit.

**Hans Feibusch, 1921-1981**

**The Baptism of Christ, Chichester Cathedral**

Hans Feibusch made his name as an artist in Germany, and was exhibited in the 1937 “Degenerate art” exhibition put on by the Nazis. He fled to England, converted to Christianity and was befriended by Bishop Bell, who commissioned him to do a mural in Chichester Cathedral. He received many commissions in his life for civic and church work. He reconverted to Judaism before his death, which was just short of his 100th birthday.

**Christ nailed to the Cross, chalk**

**Kyffin Williams (1918-200)**

Kyffin Williams was regarded as the foremost painter of Wales of the 20th Century. He studied at the Slade and then taught at Highgate School for many years. He came from and lived in Anglesey and was predominantly a painter of the Welsh landscape.

**Anglesey Coastal Scene**

**Welsh Mountains, 1972**

However, he did paint a few Christian scenes, which very much rely on Renaissance prototypes.

**Christ on the Cross**

**Christ being taken down from the cross**

**Christ being lowered into the grave**

**Hildegart Nicholas (1913-1995)**

Hildegart Nicholas was Swedish by birth and trained as a designer. She lived in Oxford and was married to the Principal of Brasenose College. A visit to Ravenna inspired her to make mosaics. She produced a number of miniature mosaics, each hardly more that two feet long and a foot high, made up of thousands and thousands of tiny pieces of splintered glass. She received two commissions for larger works.

**Cross, Chapel of John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford**

**The Prodigal, Chapel of Bournemouth General Hospital**

**Albert Herbert (1925-2008)**

**Self-portrait**

**Elijah fed by a Raven**

When he was Principal Lecturer at St Martin’s School of Art in the 1960s and ’70s, Herbert for a time gave up painting in a representational way, repressing his drive to make images that tell stories. However, finding abstraction too restrictive, he eventually found a way back to figurative painting through looking at children’s art and making primitive, illustrative, figurative etchings. Initially he had no religious education or interest in religion, but was received in the Roman Catholic church in 1958. Over his last five decades Herbert consistently painted surprising and dream-like images that are the product of an unusual and highly individual imagination. His seemingly naïve yet sophisticated paintings were the result of his life-long journey exploring 'what lies beneath the surface of the mind'. He was on a life-long search for ‘the marvelous’ which began with a youthful encounter with Surrealism. Recognised as an artist with a powerful and original poetic vision, Albert Herbert is of particular interest in relation to the theme of this series of lectures. First of all, set amongst and influenced by changing modern artistic fashions, he found himself out of sympathy with the prevailing styles and struggled long to find his own visual voice. Secondly, discovering that he was by nature religious, a fact he could not do anything about, he also struggled as to how to express his religious vision; and the two struggles fused into one. Although friends with the fashionable avant garde of the time, he knew himself to be an outsider-but one who was early championed by Sister Wendy Beckett, who regarded him as the most significant contemporary religious artist. Born in Bow and brought up in Forest Gate, he came from a very modest home with no cultural hinterland. When he left school he worked for a picture library and read a magazine on surrealist art, which affected him deeply.

**Nativity with burning bush 1991**

It came as a revelation to him that “Art was about revealing the marvellous”. Always a compulsive drawer, he attended evening classes at St Martin’s, and “totally fell in love with art and wanted to study full time, which seemed then quite impossible.”

**He remembers himself as a soldier aged 18, 2003**

 Then in 1943 at the age of 18 was called up. He took part in the second wave of Normandy landings and the advance afterwards, during which three quarters of his regiment were killed or wounded. After the war a series of scholarships enabled him to study art, eventually taking him to the Royal College of Art, where his contemporaries like John Bratby were realists of the “kitchen sink” school. Herbert found he was looking for something more subjective, art with more emotional significance and he saw something of what he was looking for in the work of Francis Bacon. When he exhibited with the realists a critic said of his work that was “like a John the Baptist crying in the wilderness.”

Herbert held teaching jobs at Leicester and Birmingham art colleges, then at St Martin’s where for a number of years he was senior lecturer. However, during this time American Abstract Art became all the rage for his students. Feeling himself old fashioned and outdated. It was a difficult time for him.

**Wasteland 1960**

Herbert threw himself into modernism for a short period.

**Thames IV 1963**

However, he found it simply was not him. He decided to try to find his way back into figurative painting through etching. “I used to creep down to the etching room in the basement of St Martin’s and work at these little prints, literary, illustrative, with bits of theology hiding behind childish jokes; all the opposite of what my modernist colleagues were teaching on the too floor.” Eventually he learnt to draw again by looking at Children’s drawings and this led him to “drawing what I felt and knew rather than what it looked like.”

**Jonah and the whale, 1985-9**

**Jonah and the whale 2005**

**Jonah and the whale, 1987**

**Jonah arrives in Nineveh 2004**

One of the persistent themes of his painting is the story of Jonah and the Whale, which had a very personal meaning for him. He had run away from his true calling and then been swallowed by the whale of modernism. However, the whale had spewed him up on the shore of figurative painting, his true calling.

**Ladder 2004**

**Moses on the Mountain of God**

Studying in Rome he found himself attracted to Roman Catholicism and he became a Catholic, though not an uncritical one. He simply found himself religious, unable to do anything about it. “At a certain age you realise what you are and there is nothing you can do about it. I just am religious. It is not rational but if I try to reject or repress it, I have a sense of loss.”  This Catholicism was far from narrow however, and a visit to a Zen monastery in South Korea gave him a feel for Buddhism as well.

**Seeking treasure blindfold, 1999**

**She finds hidden treasure, 1999**

**Within everything 1998**

**The Interior Journey, 1963**

**The temple 1964**

**The marvellous house, 1962**

He used and needed Biblical images, because this was the way he could get away from art simply as a form of private self expression. This was because biblical stories have a wider, potentially universal resonance. In addition his interest in Buddhism and indeed other archetypal images such as the goddess figure, gave him a profound sense of the inner life and the religious quest as a whole. At the same time such was his unerring sense of colour, it has been well said that his paintings can work at the abstract level alone, even without any religious connotations.

When he first found his true vocation and style as an artist he began a serious of stations of the cross for an Anglican church, but had to abandon them when they were rejected as too disturbing. Apparently they hang today in a private chapel in London. But championed by his gallery, England and Company, he continued producing work well described as magical realism. The paintings became increasingly colourful and enigmatic. “Art is not about meaning but about feelings.” Familiar biblical stories, painted in his unique style came to be his distinctive work.

**The feeding of the five thousand, 1996-8**

**Jesus stripped of his garments, 1987**

**Jesus sleeps through the storm**

**Sermon on the Mount 1996**

**Presentation in the temple, ii, 1994**

**Coming home, 1998**

**Crossing the water to the Promised Land, 1992-4**

He was one of those people who after going through a dark wood for much of his life found his style and himself to enter a productive and happy final period.

**Garden 2001**

**Clock 2008**

His last paintings were on women in idyllic gardens and looking out of a window. They are inscribed with the words “Made for joy and woe”, a reference to William Blake, his favourite artist.

**Norman Adams, 1927-2005**

**The painter in his studio**

Norman Adams was born into a working class family in Walthamstow, and despite his father’s opposition, from the age of six developed and pursued a passionate desire to be an artist. He won a scholarship to the Harrow School of Art when he was 13, but when he was 18 further progress was interrupted by his call up to do National Service. Under the strong political influence of Anna Butts, a fellow student whom he married, he registered as a conscientious objector, having to spend time in jail before being sent to work on a farm. His drawings from this period reveal a strong sense of sympathy for suffering humanity, as well as the influence of the German Expressionists and James Ensor. “I grew up beginning to associate art and religious and political thinking as one big thing that had to be dealt with as a whole.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Gates of paradise, 1947**

He had the support of the communist art critic John Berger, until as Adams put it “the religious thing kicked in”. He went to the Royal College of Art, where he was a prize winner and for all his career combined teaching with painting, obtaining a number of prestigious posts, including being keeper of the Royal Academy.

**Trees in snow**

**Story Weather. Sgaresta, West Harris**

**Evening study from Scarpa**

**Mist in the Sound**

**Orchard in the Ardeche**

His time at the Academy was followed by recognition of his work in a prestigious “Young Contemporaries” exhibition, and commissions to do Operas sets and large murals. However before long he made one of the most important decisions of his life, to move to Yorkshire high in the Pennines. It was here, rather than in his early travels on the continent. that he really discovered colour, though much later in life on the Van Gogh trail he did discover some even more vivid reds and blues. Colour was fundamental to his art and it was through colour in all its shades and forms that he pursued his vision. John Ruskin wrote “If the artist has to choose between form and colour-go for colour.” Adams could be said to have followed that advice, though for him there is not final tension in the achieved balance of form and colour. A further momentous decision was made when they first stayed and then purchased a croft on the isolated island of Scarpa. His paintings went through several different phases, but they all had behind them both the Yorkshire Dales and the skies and seas of the outer Hebrides. His paintings from Scarpa and the Pennines are deceptively simply. Certainly they can make an immediate appeal. But Anna witnesses to the endless complexity from which they came. They are works of great compression, minimalist if you like, but Anna recorded that they sometimes when through as many as 18 versions.

Although he sometimes felt that his career had suffered by moving away from the London art scene, he also knew that nature was absolutely fundamental to his vision. He needed to be in those isolated places. But he was not a nature artist in any simple sense. It was nature that allowed his imagination to take off. In 1970 he wrote, “My favourite artist (indeed my favourite man) has always been William Blake, and he, of all people, has had most influence on me (except in his opinion of nature, and I don't believe him when he says, ‘nature always dried up the imagination in him’.” Unlike Blake, Adams drew on nature throughout his career. Although a city dweller for much of his life, Adams seems to have connected the countryside with spiritual inspiration, claiming that city artists, ‘lose their heritage and are spiritually emasculated

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**The Battle with Apollyon**

Art for him was a work of the imagination, so when in 1970 he did a large commission based on Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progess’ for St Anselm’s, Kennington, he did not try to depict the scenes in any obvious sense. He allowed the story to fire his imagination. They tell the story from the wilderness of this world through to paradise via the slough of despond and death, mainly through the use of rich and contrasting colours. After the place of deliverance pilgrims meets Apollyon, the master of this world and after sustaining injuries, defeats him.)

**Jesus falls for the second time**

**Jesus falls for the third time**

**Nailing to the cross**

**The crucifixion**

**The resurrection**

The stations of the cross, the Lent and Holy Week devotion, originated with the Fransiscans, and was rooted in the Via Crucis in Jerusalem, first walked in the 13th century. Number of stations stabilised as 14 in 17th century and adopted in all Catholic Churches in 18th century. Work done with his wife, Anna Adams, a ceramic artist for the Church of Our Lady, Milton Keynes in 1974/5. He said he tried to “make them simple and intimate-passionate and unthreatening. Small in scale and placed at eye level on the wall, I hope the viewer will find him or herself taken into the drama and able to identify with the main characters.” The Resurrection an altar piece.

**Jesus is condemned to death-Ecce homo**

**Jesus is stripped of his garments**

**Jesus dies on the cross**

**Jesus is buried in the tomb**

In 1993 Canon Denis Clinch of St Mary’s, Mulberry Street in Manchester asked Sister Wendy Beckett to recommend an artist for a commission in his church. She submitted a list and he chose Norman Adams. The work he produced he regarded as the greatest of his life-profoundly moving in its sense of suffering and compassion.

**Silent Meeting, 2000**

**The Golden Crucifixion, 1993**

Towards the end of his life his work, at least from a spiritual point of view, came to its consummation in his large watercolours. He described himself as a “compulsive believer” but one who looked to religion to give him inspiration rather than instruction. This move away from oil was largely forced on him by the progress of his Parkinson’s disease. More profoundly it brought out even more strongly his spiritual vision. As well as Blake he said his great inspirations were Grunewald’s Isenheim altarpiece and Giotto’s Scrovegni chapel in Padua. The emergence of “Brit Art” left him feeling rejected. Indeed when a Saatchi inspired exhibition appeared in 1997 under the title “Sensation” he exploded “Art is about anything but sensation”. Earlier in life he had experienced a moment of revelation when looking at a butterfly. He realised that the beauty of the butterfly existed just for its own sake, and it gave him an abiding sense that whatever else might be part of the picture, beauty needed to be part of it.His denied that his paintings were abstract. He saw them in terms of the human journey, that journey with its joy and suffering being conveyed through forms of colour. He needed nature to inspire him but what it inspired was a search for form through colour. However these forms were not for their own sake. “Subject has always been most important” he wrote, “I cannot start a painting until I am driven by an almost moralistic idea. Of course the idea-subject-and form must match perfectly-becoming a homogeneous root.”[[12]](#footnote-12) “The thorough integration of the forces of the medium-pigment, texture, light, colour-and the forces of nature-emotion, drama, the joy and the sorrow and to find precise equivalents in the former for aspects of the latter has been a major task.”[[13]](#footnote-13)He did a number of major religious commissions, and his exhibition in Bradford in the 1960’s had an introduction to the catalogue that refers to his mystical and religious works of the time as without parallel in the 20th century.However, he suggested that Christian imagery became less important to him later in life. He was brought up in a household with no religious belief and the religious paintings in his grandparents house struck him as being about death and were something he feared. The religion he found his way into though art was a religion of life. This was a religion in which the aesthetic and the religious and indeed all life was one. As he said in an interview in 1978, “I discovered art before I discovered religion…what art-and I include music as well as painting-did for me was to open a new way. It showed that religion was not all about death, but about life. I think art is about life-about people-about living.”[[14]](#footnote-14) “The religious subject matter of many of my paintings is rarely a statement of faith. It is nearly always a formal questioning. All my work evolves from a kind of puzzlement, excitement, and-at best-love. It is fed by the arts and nature. I believe that the best of man is in the arts; they are the best reason for optimism.”[[15]](#footnote-15)Again after suggesting that all the arts have a message, one which is conveyed in part by the great religions of the world he adds “Please don’t ask me what the message is. I don’t think it is given to artists to know what the message is. I believe the artist is essentially the doer, the maker. He merely carries out, affectionately, the orders that are passed on to him and he doesn’t ask any questions.”[[16]](#footnote-16) His paintings convey life and joy. But they are far from sentimental, and as A.S. Byatt emphasises the dark side of life is integral to them. “They are Blake’s Songs of Experience combined with, or masquerading as, the Songs of Innocence. He disliked being compared with Cecil Collins, and with reason-his gaze was altogether harder and grimmer. There is no sentiment in his world.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The critic Peter Fuller saw a great sadness running through much of the work, though he like others thinks that Adams gives a message of hope and promise. Adams felt his paintings had a strong message even though he could not say what that message was. To so many who admire his paintings, that message was about something more to life than we normally apprehend, something beyond. Indeed Adams did from time to time understand his work as a painter in those terms. He said that a diving Gannet revealed another world beyond it “I am constantly being made aware of things that I can’t pick up with my senses”. In painting or drawing one is “constantly, imaginatively, trying to pick up things beyond one’s actual comprehension.” [[18]](#footnote-18) The only way he could indicate what this might be like was to suggest the analogy of sound. Sound originally inspired by the sound of the wind and waves of the Outer Hebrides. The Vicar at Norman’s funeral reported that when he had asked Norman if he knew what heaven looked like, he received the reply “No. But I know how it sounds. It is like a movement of a Mahler Symphony.”[[19]](#footnote-19) There is he said, a strong sense of sound in his paintings. Sister Wendy Beckett sums up their effect well when she writes “Norman communicates by colour, creating an atmosphere far more profound and spiritual than any more explicit iconography can command.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

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1. Frances Spalding, British Art since 1900, Thames and Hudson, 1986, p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *ibid.* p.184 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* p.215 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Gibbon Williams, The Art of Craigie Aitchison, Canongate, 1966, p.64. Also the obituary in The Telegraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Art of Craigie Aitchison, p.115 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Norman St John Stevas, 1981, BBC archives [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with Norman St John Stevas, 1981, BBC archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The World [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Reilly, The Painted Word, Cross Publishing 2008,p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Emma Spencer, “Tradition and innovation in Christian Art” in The Painted Word, p.111 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Adams, p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Adams, p.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Norman Adams, p.85 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nicholas Usherwood, Norman Adams, 108 Fine Art, 2006, p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Adams, p.58 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Adams, p.89 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A.S. Byatt, in Nicholas Usherwood, Norman Adams, 108 Fine Art, 2006 p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Adams, p.37 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Adams, p.78 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Adams, p.75 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)