

A critique of the paintings in the MCCMCA by Francis Hoyland

**Presented at the opening of an exhibition of the Collection at the Royal West of England Academy,
Bristol, January 2003**

NB The numbers refer to the 'The Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art: An Introduction' by Roger Wollen, published in 2000 by the Trustees of the Collection (ISBN 0-9538135-0-9). All the works in the Collection at that date are evaluated with the exception of the drawing by Ralph Beyer (No 2) and the sculptures by Frank Roper (Nos 30 – 33)

1. Norman Adams - Christ's Entry into Jerusalem

'I can trace everything I have done back to a source of inspiration in nature' writes Norman Adams. But it seems to me that there is another source – art: particularly that of Ensor and Klee. And I found myself thinking of Maurice Denis's definition of a painting as 'a flat surface in which colours are arranged in a certain order'; while I was looking at this piece. I suppose one of the reasons I find it delightful is that I can empathise with the way it is done. 'What fun' I find myself thinking, 'to draw with a relaxed line on good paper and then fill it in with artists quality water colour. My fingers itch to share in this delight! But in order to get the colours to 'sit down' together like this one would have to be a bit of a master and to get them to recede and advance as they do is not easy, nor is it easy to produce continuously inventive imagery. Look, for instance at the role of the sunflower in the right foreground; it relates to other sunflowers and to the sun on the flag and may even refer to the Son of God as well.

The painting is divided into separate areas - the central, bright and square, holds the principal drama - it is surrounded by a hedge of russet and green shapes, which is criss-crossed in a way that may refer to the coming crown of thorns.

Only two figures inhabit this marginal area - an ancient man who seems to be led towards the principal event by the little girl in red and, top left, a weeping female head which must be Our Lord's mother. Christ is yellow light and epitomises the radiance present in the colour of the whole. He processes along a mainly green strip or rectangle. He moves towards a white cross on a dark flag - a red cross and a Union Jack hang behind him. Since these crosses occur on flags, perhaps they make reference to the fact that Our Lord was slain as a deliberate act of state, as well as to the horrors that nationalism can produce!

A pale, blue shape like an inverted 'L' frames part of the central rectangle letting in cool air. This finds echoes in other blue areas; the lady behind the donkey's head, for instance. Squares, crosses and diagonals of squares crop up everywhere. The relationships between them is often emphasised by colour.

The pictorial language used is both subtle and supple. Within the central square something like a traditional space is set up. The children and dogs in the foreground are definitely in front of Our Lord and the dark figures processing before him. And they, too, are in front of the man looking out of the window. The flags also seem to be hanging within a recognisable volume of air. However, round the edges of the central square, space gives way to a loosely arranged pattern of diamond shapes - interspersed with leaves that may stand for palm branches as well as the crown of thorns.

The sunflowers shout "hosanna" with the children in the foreground - indeed two of the central group have, subliminal sunflowers printed on them. I wonder if the two dark figures are the Pharisees who asked Our Lord to stop the children praising him.

I have tried to hint at some of the wealth of this beautiful painting and I am sure that you can discover more. But what makes it work so well?

First the continual interaction between a realised space and the lovely pattern of the picture surface, which is particularly clearly shown by the relation between the central square and its surround, takes our fancy and holds our interest. This happens everywhere - is it flat or is it three-dimensional? The answer is clearly that it is both, and somewhere within this playful, pictorial activity and within the deceptively 'easy' and seemingly relaxed pencil lines that seem to have come first, and the act of colouring, the Holy Spirit has found a place. This Spirit, that Milton described as the one who 'Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss and made it pregnant', can, of course, 'blow where he listeth' and all an artist can do is to construct a nest by a process of child-like play and hope that the Holy Spirit will find it comfortable.

I don't know exactly what kind of faith Norman Adams professes, but he certainly is concerned with a feeling of 'rightness' or pictorial truth - and since Our Lord is Truth, as far as art is concerned, that will do.

3. Edward Burra - The Pool of Bethesda

My first reaction to this painting is to think how Italian it is: Michaelangelo and Tintoretto immediately spring to mind. Not only because of the vigorous, muscular activity of the figures but also because of the equally vigorous chiaroscuro, or light and dark, and the way the coloured forms emerge from a neutral matrix of grey, though for Michaelangelo and Tintoretto this 'matrix' would have been warmer.

A dense and 'through-composed' strip of figures stretches right across the foreground behind which we glimpse the pool. The spectral invalids in the distance are almost entirely painted in the prevailing grey - though some splashes of red unite them to the figures in the foreground. These figures, in particular remind me of passages in the background of Tintoretto's paintings where figures are seemingly 'flicked in' in the base colours.

One can think of the colours by categorising them in terms of their relation to the prevailing grey: some are much warmer than this grey - that is they tend more to red, orange and yellow; one at any rate, is much the same temperature - this is the figure or at any rate the robe of the figure, to the left of Christ - and some are colder, and this really means blue, since the prevailing grey is pretty cold already.

The poses are nearly all extreme. Take the figure to the left of Christ; his weight is on his left leg and the right leg twists across it. His hips and shoulders move against each other and his head is turned sharply to the left. Or take the central, yellow figure, supporting the stricken man who has turned entirely blue. Surprisingly the thrust forward leg turns out to be his left leg which is almost impossibly joined to his yellow, wasp waist. We finally discover his right foot beneath the hanging arm of the blue man. There is an interesting elision of colour between the other figure carrying the blue man and the man leaning on a stick to his left. Their poses could not be more distinct but the union of colour seems to create a kind of hybrid, - or push-me-pull-you creature.

It do not think that the space was conceived first and then filled with figures. Rather it is as if the heightened degree of realisation of the figures compels the space to exist, though the depth of the cavern, spot-lit by two cones of light and glimpses and glimmers from round the corners of tunnels, does become almost frighteningly real.

I 'read' this painting by empathising with the muscular life of the figures. I can almost feel the vigour of their movements within myself, and despite the dark mood of the piece this process of identification has a tonic affect on me. It is as if I am living more intensely than usual. This is something that happens a lot to me when I am looking at the work of Michaelangelo and Tintoretto. If I think of how Edward Burra must have drawn and painted this picture, I imagine him 'spinning' these contorted forms out of his own physical being and working on them till he

was satisfied that they had become real: come real as forms that is but also as forms that carried a high voltage of feeling.

What is this picture about? Clearly it is about suffering and the relation of God, or an idea of God, to suffering. Burra was a sick man for much of his life and rarely left his sick-room studio, so this subject was very real to him. All the figures are tainted by sickness and the vigour of the helpers is almost like the vigour of disease. They may be hoping to cure the sufferers by throwing them into the pool but they almost might as well be preparing to throw them into hell. From Burra's, the sufferer's standpoint, everything seemed hurt and tainted by suffering. But what of the figure of Christ? Is he, as God, being accused by Burra, like a second Job, of injustice? Or is he unable to do much about it and is throwing up his hands in despair? Or is he really in the process - to Burra the seemingly impossible and desperately hoped-for process - of healing the blue figure in the bottom right hand corner? Well let us look at this figure: We remember that he was a paralytic but here he is raising both hands in surprise - surely something is happening - so unlooked and almost unhelped-for by Burra that it is happening in a corner - but nevertheless happening. The blue-clad figure removing his wrap may be a daemon or surprised assistant, but then we remember that the paralytic had no one to help him.

Everything in the painting seems ambiguous and loaded with dubious meaning, but despite this the sick man is raising his hands. Hope that has triumphed over despair is surely hope at its strongest. Maybe it is happening here.

The artistic 'game' played out in this painting is one of physical empathy in which we, the spectators, empathise with the depicted figures as well as sorting out the colours into warm, cool and neutral areas. One has to have something to occupy ones mind till the message of the painting takes over. This spectator sport can be a difficult game to play since painters tend to invent their own rules, but my advice is to empathise with the artist's act of making and 'read' a painting as if you were painting it. It can be a great help to make a drawing for yourself.

The spirituality or message of this work may be anguished, but it is true and therefore artistically alive because Burra lived with sickness - and this painting truthfully records his experience and what was the case for him. In the last resort it is painted with hope - for if he was in a state of despair he could not have raised his painter's hand to raise the blue patient's hands.

One other 'game' one can play with this painting is to watch how Burra conjures the colour out of the prevailing grey. The grey world is like a common existence of undifferentiated matter that has yet to become fully personal, or particular. When I see the painting in this light it is almost like watching the invention of the world as God raises His hands - what is He making out of suffering? What was He doing with Edward Burra? We get some clear answers on Good Friday and Easter Monday, but we will have to wait to the next world to hear the whole story.

4. Mark Cazalet - Nathaniel (asleep under the fig tree)

First, these are desirable objects: I long to pick them up and sample the delicious texture of the hand made paper with my fingers. One side would be mat, textured and dry and the other glossy, smoother and rich. The oddly irregular regularity of the squares of paper has obviously stimulated Cazalet's sense of design and enabled him to 'see' his figures and other forms within the paper before he touched it with paint. It seems to me that this process of 'seeing' forms and then putting lines round them and filling them with colour is a very ancient one, for isn't this just what the ice age masters were doing on the walls of their caves? They were 'releasing' something that they felt was already there. Michaelangelo used to speak of 'releasing' a figure from a marble block and Leonardo da Vinci tells artists to look at a mouldy wall or to throw a sponge filled with ink at a wall in order to stimulate themselves into 'seeing' battles and other events. The English watercolour artist Cozens used to start his painting by making blots of ink or water colour on paper and then 'seeing' landscapes there. Bur surely this process is more

fundamental than that for when one draws from nature, one looks at the subject and then at ones paper before making a line. Indeed this "seeing" seems fundamental to the practice of visual art.

These paintings are compact, the forms dominate the space of the area they are painted on. When I was a student of Victor Passmore he used to make me decide before I started a work whether the form dominated the space or the space dominated the form. Here we find Mark going for form on both occasions. The delight that he finds as he applies his rich paint to his dry paper comes to me at full force as I look at these works. It is not only seeing ahead of what one does that matters but what one sees as one does it. The doing reveals the next thing to be done, the doing is done with rich paint that has its own momentum and its richness is in a state of potentiality to the next act. The lovely chord of five nameable colours; red, pale and dark green, brown and cream sounds together with great resonance. We 'read' the picture by empathising with Mark Cazalet's acts of making.

Nathaniel lies foetus-like curled up under his tree without disguise and without deceit. Our Lord will make a great leader from this foetus! The beautifully drawn tree - had Mark slipped out to draw a real one? - is the tree from Eden and of the Cross - an image of temptation and salvation - it can go either way and remember, another fig tree which symbolised Israel was withered by God's curse. Nathaniel still unconscious will have to choose. But this is a picture of what Jesus sees. "I saw you under the fig tree." This is a daring thing to do for Mark has seen onto his paper something Our Lord saw in his omnipotence.

5. Mark Cazalet - Fool of God

Our Lord slumps over a rock forming a serpentine diagonal across the square painting. A blue tree makes a firm division of the rectangle as does the skyline and the division between the higher ground in the foreground and the rest. These divisions are made with great assurance. There is no fumbling, everything is definite and clear, the various forms take their places with a kind of inevitability, but it is the colour that is chiefly responsible for the mood of the painting. The same brown red is used as in the Nathaniel painting but in the context of the cold blue tree and the sonorous darks that surround it. It is saying something completely different. Colours generate light in painting but they can also, as they do in these two pictures, generate mood. Painting has a lot in common with music: both arts can communicate emotional states; both need the support of consistently-built forms; and both can hint at realms of spiritual being seemingly beyond feeling. If they did not they could not share spiritual truths with us. What is felt is physical, but faith, hope and charity in their bare state unadorned with consolations are truly supernatural. It is the presence of these virtues that makes work 'religious.' Or maybe I should say one can read back through a picture to the motivation of the artist which can be based in these three virtues. As we reach back, we share, so the painting has become a channel through which something of ultimate importance has flowed.

6. Eularia Clarke - The Five Thousand

Eularia Clarke was inspired to produce this picture while eating fish and chips at Canvey Island. She wrote of the fear she felt about painting Our Lord and how she only felt able to include a priest - and only half a priest at that - in the top right hand corner of the painting, as a kind of surrogate for him. Besides this the priest is engaged in the most secular part of the Mass for he is reading the parish notices after he has finished his sermon.

The resulting image is strange in a way because if the priest is saying Mass then his congregation are breaking the Eucharistic fast with a vengeance by eating fish and chips! Also some of the congregation have their backs to the altar! However, all becomes clear if we realise that here we are in the realm of type and anti type. The most classic example of the relation of type to anti-type is given by Our Lord Himself when He said. "The Son of man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone that believes may have eternal life in him." In other words the healing power of the brazen serpent, which was presumably set on a cruciform standard was a type for the anti-type of the sacrifice of Golgotha whole healing power over sin we all rely on.

If we apply this kind of thinking to this painting it is clear that the priest stands for Christ and that the feeding of the five thousand is a 'type' for the 'anti-type' of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and for the reception of Holy Communion thereafter.

Another strange thing about this picture is that it is happening during Eularia Clarke's lifetime not in 32AD or thereabouts. Here again we have an anti-type - that is Eularia's experience at Canvey Island - setting off the resonance of the 'type' of the actual feeding of the Five Thousand, which was itself a 'type' of the Eucharist so, for her, everything was working together.

It seems to me that the fun of working out the meaning of this picture is a good way of getting closer to the meaning of the story and of sharing with Eularia some of the Faith we hold in common - at any rate now we can relax and enjoy the spectacle!

Taken together the figures make an overall pattern on the picture surface. Even though the ones at the top are slightly smaller this is certainly not a perspective space in which geometrical rules are applied to establish the way that things get smaller as they get further away. When one applies the rules of perspective one begins by establishing one's own position in relation to the things one is painting. Someone looking at the picture then identifies with the artist and becomes the unmoving apex of a cone of vision. This gives the artist and the spectator a sort of power over what is depicted but since Eularia was equally concerned with every person and had no intention of owning or dominating anyone, this sort of space did not suit her and she invented this even spread of figures instead. However, it is clear that we are looking down quite steeply on the figures at the bottom of the painting and for that matter on the altar at the top. Maybe we are looking at a hillside or possibly not. Then again the grass we hear of in the gospel spreads evenly across the space and its individual leaves get no smaller as they recede from us. But all these apparent inconsistencies make up an image that is consistent when we consider Eularia's aim was to show how important each individual and each object was to her. For this purpose the space could not be arranged better. The painting is full of delightful incidents: the boy sitting on his father; the child in yellow using her mother as a table as her mother stretches out, curling her toes, bicycles, a primus, the sleeping woman in the bottom left hand corner and so on.

It is clear that Eularia needed to have seen the crowd at Canvey Island in order to paint this picture and this fact seems to embody a spiritual truth. God has become so mixed up with man since his incarnation that one can see the effects of his presence everywhere - if one has eyes to see.

7. Eularia Clarke : Storm over the lake

But what did Eularia see or experience here? It was clearly pretty horrific and if she hadn't told us we would probably think of war or some terrible personal tragedy - but it was only teaching. That only would sound pretty hollow to most teachers because they know what teaching is like, especially with a class of rowdy boys. Yes, I'm afraid it does ring true. This time she managed to face painting Our Lord - probably because she needed him so much, as she stresses the substantial union of his divinity and humanity by a beautifully glowing halo. We can see how effective his power is by looking at the patch of water under his hand., the waves which are menacing and vast, elsewhere have become well behaved ripples and they reflect an upside down dove which again symbolises the Spirit moving on the face of the waters so the unity of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The breaking waves slant at an angle of about thirty degrees from left to right down the picture and this angle is repeated by the direction of the furled sails. If we compare the treatment of space with that in the Feeding of the Five Thousand we can see a great similarity for we are above the action but not in a central position as before. The thighs and feet of Christ share the direction of the waves; the drop of his right shoulder twists his head until it is at

right angles to their general direction, but then his right arm turns until it is parallel with the waves again. It is here that the waves are quiet. Something has turned the laws of nature round!

The ship of this subject has been thought of as a symbol of the church, in which case she seems to be in a bad way. But the calm has already started to spread and eventually all will be well.

Eularia's vision was extreme, she sees our predicament as almost hopeless since quite a lot of the crew seem to be drowning - in fact some of her faces are as frightening as the most depressed heads painted by Lowry, but there in the bottom left hand corner is the visible action of Grace. The free gift which of God's friendship, we could never earn, that brings us peace. All we have to do is to accept it.

I find that when an artist tells me the truth about pain, I am more inclined to believe than that when they speak of consolation and faith – Eularia is such an artist.

8. Roy de Maistre - Noli me tangere (touch me not)

At first sight this looks like an abstracted, cubist or futurist painting, and in some important ways it is; however, if we compare it with, say, the work of Eularia Clarke, its spatial arrangement is almost conventional since our position in relation to the focus in the painting is definite: we are low down on the level of Saint Mary Magdalene's hand and about two yards from her.

Both figures are kneeling and the figure of Christ is so large that He towers over Mary. He folds His arms across His chest as He explains that He had not yet risen to His Father. His vast stature emphasises the transcendence of the risen Christ, but this means that it would be difficult to mistake Him for a gardener! Indeed some of the intimacy and tenderness of St John's account has been sacrificed for grandeur. I wonder which is the most God-like attribute - maybe it is the tenderness and humility of Jesus that shows us most about His divinity?

The drawing is very direct and every part of the design is emphatically delineated with light or dark contours. The areas between these lines are not modelled with separate tints, but forcibly filled in, mostly with plain areas of red and blue. The forms are realised by the almost sculptural drawing and by the changing values of the slabs of colour between the lines.

Picasso's influence is apparent in the 'double' view of Our Lord's head - you can see His profile to the left of the main head - in the patterned integration of foreground and background and in the way the drawing tends to simplify the individual forms until they become signs.

There is no mistaking the grandeur of this work and de Maistre's sincerity is communicated to us through the unflinching courage of the execution.

Right angles and abrupt changes of direction dominate the work - for instance the general slant of Mary's body culminating in her outstretched arm is at right angles to the tilt of Our Lord's body and so on.

One way to 'get into' the drawn language of the painting is to start with the black contour about Our Lord's brow and then look at the shapes above and below it. The drawing really 'catches on' like this over and over again, but the important thing is that our reading of the structure of this painting enables us to share in the reality of the faith of the artist.

9. Roy de Maistre: The supper at Emmaus

Here again the direct and straightforward painting of this picture takes hold of me at once. The picture is divided by vertical strips of colour that are at their most intense across the top. We read off the tints: coral, warm red, cream, violet, green and blue. These strips penetrate the figures below but they do not affect their drawing; which remains sculpturally intact throughout. De Maistre contrives to balance in this way traditional influences with the example of modern artists (remember he was born in 1894) like Picasso.

The vertical bands of colour emphasise the flat nature of the picture surface which painters are obliged to respect and recreate at the same time that they attempt to realise three-dimensional forms. Indeed, the central act of making here is consistently both two and three dimensional, and it is one of the secrets of the painting's strength. Start with the broken hexagon about Our Lord's neck and move from the strongly slanting, left right direction in his neck across the space to the right until you come up against the contour of the rear disciple's neck. We realise this is a flat shape on a flat surface but as we do so the space opens up between the two figures. It is the recognition of relationships like this that constitute the chief delight of looking at a picture - and of drawing. Look again at the tight series of shapes about Our Lord's mouth which expand into his beard, moustache and chin. This time the harshly drawn directions accrue into a tightly-knit sculptured unit.

The squarish format of the painting is crossed by the semi-diagonal thrust of the blue arm passing across Christ. This thrust is repeated in the heads of both disciples and the head of Jesus seems to exist in a state of dynamic equipoise between them. A vertical pile of forms can often be impressive, and when we examine the red and coral area on the left we see fruit, a hand and a head one above the other, which give a towering majesty to the design. When we climb up to the head on the left in this way we can traverse through the head of Christ to the head of the disciple on the right. Now we realise, perhaps for the first time, that the disciple on the left is well behind the figure of Christ. This surprises us since the head of the disciple on the right is smaller on the picture plane than that of the disciple on the left.

One of the advantages of dividing a picture into coloured areas is that one can allow one coloured area to infiltrate another. For instance the forehead of Christ is roughly the yellow of the 'parent' strip whereas his cheeks and neck have been infiltrated by the warm red of the strip to the left. The coolness of the blue and green strips to the right moves right across the central area as a blue, while the coral table echoes the coral strip on the left. The yellow, green and blue areas are repeated at a greater intensity in the bowl of fruit.

This interchange of shape, tonality and colour is the stuff of painting and De Maistre uses it the service of his faith, which is robust and full of hope.

10. Michael Edmunds - The Cross over the City

A late painting by the pioneering abstract artist Mondrian is called *Broadway boogie-woogie*. It is a kinetic piece in which little coloured squares seem to jump about because the prismatic colours he used appear to interchange with one another. The painting is about traffic in New York and boogie-woogie. In fact he exploited the way that the eye works and tires. Bridget Riley has made a lot of paintings which make use of the same process.

Although the units from which Michael Edmunds' piece is composed do not leap about like this, the procession of small coloured squares up the centre of the Cross do suggest lines of traffic which I read as ascending on the left and descending on the right. The units of the Cross suggest a crossroad, and here it is worth remembering that one often sees a crucifix at cross roads in catholic countries.

The horizontal red units probably stand for houses, all identical and neatly lined up: and the gold? Perhaps this is there to tell us that even in a city, Grace can reach us, and even there are the everlasting arms.

The units from which the piece is composed are impersonal and suggest the depersonalisation of much of modern life as does the abstract idiom used by the artist.

The art of looking at works of this kind is to try to share the thought of the artist and to consider why he or she has used the materials that they have. All visual art is made from materials that are quite distinct from what is depicted. An apple is not paint, paint is not an apple and so on, but figurative painting does have a direct relation to what we see.

The painted apple does look like an apple and for this to happen we must learn to draw, which is an activity that seems to carry its own reward for as we draw we see and feel more than before. The conceptual artist asks us to share his or her thought - not his or her more primitive sensations of 'thereness', weight and space. Figurative art has a direct link with ice age art and I do not think this link will be broken.

But here we have another art form, it is a distinct activity. There is a sense in which all visual art is a metaphor - the image is not the thing depicted. So in order to succeed an artist has to reach a deep level where his subject matter, his thought, his feelings and his materials are sensed to be interconnected or as a Christian artist would say, all are held in existence by the intention of Almighty God who 'made all things at night.' When this deep existence is understood in some way the work will become beautiful since God is beauty, so it is fair to expect art to be beautiful.

11. Elizabeth Frink - Pieta

This drawing is as physical as the work of Edmunds is abstract. The figure is heavy and very masculine. I am fascinated by the drawing round the mouth and chin where the contours have been reiterated at least four times. It looks as though they swung to the left and then back again. I guess that Frink was thinking of the mass of the head as a whole as she made these marks rather than of an elegant silhouette, which is why that part of the jaw feels so massive to us. The whole image seems to have been felt for in this way, but I sense some connection between the marks on the surface of the paper as well, the shape between the forearm of the near arm, the upper part of the same arm and the further arm-pit seems to have been 'seen' as part of the picture surface as well as form. The 'nest' of space and shape under the chin seems to work in both ways and the line emerging from it and travelling towards the raised arm connects with the arm below as well as the strong direction under the arm-pit. We recognise that Frink 'saw' these things because we can see them ourselves. Drawing is always a dialogue between the second and third dimensions. Seeing in this sense does not necessarily mean seeing a model, but rather paying attention to what one is doing while one is doing it.

The design is certainly grand with its great slanting lines, which fill the rectangle and the opposing tilt of the head. It is a stern celebration of the strength rather than the apparent defeat of Christ which would give rise to pity or to a 'Pieta.' The marks from which the drawing is made go round the forms as we can see in the near forearm and sometimes they appear to bleed. I am reminded of an early Norse or Irish Christian poem which I once read which portrays Our Lord as a kind of Nordic hero, mounting the Cross as trial of strength - we are far from the serene God-man of St John's Gospel.

12. Eric Gill - Annunciation

To me this piece seems redolent of a certain aspect of its period, just before the First World War. Everything appears clean and spotless. The furniture and clothes are spare and decorous and the whole space is conceived with

great simplicity. Yet two years after this watercolour was made the world started tearing itself to bits with the kind of self righteous brutality with which we are now all too familiar. At the time this painting was made cubism was flourishing; the Fauve School had come and gone and George Rouault had faced up to his own passions as well as to the injustices of society, in his first great paintings. We know that Eric Gill had much in himself that he did not include or face up to in his art. I leave the question with you - is this painting a cover up, an untruth? Is it so apparently pure because it is subconsciously trying to hide something?

Let us think for a moment about the real Annunciation - why was Our Lady alone in the little, peasant house? Maybe her rather elderly parents were doing something in the vineyard down the hill while she got on with preparing food or washing garments. The house would have had a flat roof with a low barrier around it (the barrier was there because the law insisted on it.) There would have been an under-croft inhabited by the family donkey, whose presence would have helped warm the upper floor. Old stone steps led up to the living area which may have been one, largish room. I imagine that a kind of covered balcony looked over the slope on which Our Lady's parents were working and it may have been there that the Archangel greeted her, since he would not have wanted her to feel cornered. He greets her with the announcement that she is in a state of complete friendship with God, and then calms the fear that his presence and message cause. She had a completely clear head about this and she asks a sensible question. She was not bullied into saying 'yes' - her assent was given in the full knowledge of what her child would have to suffer, because we know from her Magnificat how well she knew her scripture. "He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins", might have flashed through her mind. She could have got out of it and lived happily ever after, but when she heard of her cousin's pregnancy she knew that she would have to go and help her, and how could she help anyone if she had said 'no' to Almighty God? So, after considering everything and wanting above all to remain in a state of friendship with God, she said 'yes' and that 'yes' has given us a chance, because it was then that the Incarnation took place.

This fiercely radical event was the hinge that opened a new epoch. Vast issues for the living and the dead hung on that moment, deaths and suffering were bound to follow as well as the justification and salvation of fallen humanity. The fact that the Word was now Flesh has a huge significance and it seems to me that an artist has to make use of his or her whole self to celebrate this event. We should, I think, open the very darkness of our passions and the eyes of the Almighty God and let him purify them like 'a refiners fire' and then use them to His glory. We cannot hide from Him.

'Nothing comes from nothing' and Eric Gill has said something that has led me to a different kind of meditation but he started it!

13. Dennis Hawkins - Pentecost I

I feel an innate sympathy with someone who had a dual vocation, artist and teacher; so I will say what comes into my head.

In the first place I feel that looking at the piece must be treated as a visual meditation - so while sitting quietly before it, I notice the white area on which the whole piece is placed. White, the colour that contains all colours and yet just *is*! 'I AM' is said to Moses - 'Say that I AM sent you!' - existence itself, but also, by a mystery, a person. As I look, the presence of each person becomes apparent: black writing, like the action of a pen on white paper - a word - perhaps a metaphor for The Word - the self knowledge of Almighty God - 'gazing into the depths' - then between white and black there are intermediate values of grey - something that unites the two - a metaphor, maybe, for the love of the Son for the Father and the Father for the Son - the Holy Spirit. I notice the sprinkle of white to the right of the desk top and move it to the corona round the central circle - then to the brilliant circle itself. The light has come on! It makes me realise I am always in the presence of God without realising it and I have learnt this where

the artist's pupils learnt from him - at a school desk. Finally, all is one in this piece, there is no dissonance although there is much individuation. Three distinct in person, but one in nature - Basic Theology.

14. Albert Herbert - Epiphany

I find this a very beautiful painting. Somehow the fact that Our Lady and Her divine Son are safely tucked up in bed in a cosy looking stable, which is still very much a place of real poverty, while the Magi trudge towards is very touching. Incidentally, were the Holy Family still living in a stable when the Magi arrived? Because Saint Matthew says 'When they had come into the house'. Perhaps the family of one of the holy shepherds had 'adopted' them - in fact this seems likely after what the shepherds had seen!

The stable, or house, is very compact and 'there' as a form, it stands on bare but fertile looking land, and the dark, blue sky arches over it. Perhaps we can see a glimmer of the star in the roof above the right of the door.

The rich, densely 'impasted' paint, the hefty realisation of the forms and the warm magnanimity of Herbert's attitude seem to give him a position in the art world somewhere alongside Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossof and their great teacher David Bomberg. The Swedish painter Lundquist also comes to mind. These men were, and are, concerned with weight, gravity and in Bomberg's words 'the spirit in the mass'. Here we find an essentially Jewish (though probably only semi-orthodox) tradition stemming from Bomberg in the hands of a Christian artist, and it seems to be very much at home there.

Herbert has used everything he has to make this painting: his passions, his spiritual recourses, and his sense of himself as a heavy lump that moves laboriously across the ball of our planet held onto its surface by its own weight and by the weight of the earth itself acting as gravity. This is what it means to be human. This is what it means to be flesh. 'And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. Then there is St. John's other great image: 'The Word was the true light that enlightens all men' and 'God is light; there is no darkness in him at all'. Here the light glimmers and glows about and from the Holy Pair. How warm and tender and Christmassy it all is!

Another saying of St. John comes to mind, 'Something that we have watched and touched with our hands; the Word who is life - this is our subject'. Touch - the spread of paint from a loaded palette knife on a congenial surface, layer upon layer, like 'Grace in return for Grace'. Even the darkness sings.

I salute an artist who has achieved many of the things I hope to achieve myself.

15. Patrick Heron - Crucifix and Candles: Night

This painting is derived from a part of a painting by Titian in the National Gallery. Heron insisted that he 'was not a member of any church' and it was made from a 'purely pictorial experience'. But is it possible for a highly cultivated European like Patrick Heron to be that detached from Christianity? For European culture is basically Christian and all the values that have made Europe more than just another gaggle of contesting states come from Christianity, even anti-clericalism is a reaction against the church that built Europe and so is inevitably connected to it. No, I think some resonance from Titian's Faith reached Heron's inner ear and he was moved by the Titian because Truth found a way of reaching Heron through another man's paint.

It looks as though Heron has reduced the tortured figure of 'Our Lord' to a calligraphic formula, but can such a subject ever be treated in such a flip way? Even Monty Python's despairing blasphemies treat the crucifixion with a fundamental seriousness. I notice that the figure of Jesus is crowned, but not with thorns; it seems to hark back to another tradition of robed and crowned crucifixes.

Crisp, fresh and seemingly unaltered charcoal lines sweep across the textured surface. The space is realised by these lines and by the fact that we empathise with their making. We can sense just what it must have felt like to draw on this surface.

The near candlestick really is near and the crucifix is situated in the realised space between it and the far one. The window opening on to the night really does go back, and it does so with a whoosh!

I empathise next with Patrick Heron's mixing of simple colours in relation to one another on his pallet, which may have led to trials made on bits of paper, and then with the few minutes in the which he actually brushed the paint onto the canvas. All of this is abundantly clear and accessible - Heron has used his senses - his body - his flesh -and made something attractive; and maybe he, too, was a channel of Grace.

16 – 18 Frances Hoyland - Nativity Polyptych, Holy Communion Predella and Crucifixion Polyptych

I do not think that I am mature enough, or sufficiently detached to give a commentary on my own paintings but I can tell you a few things about them. Every scene was more or less wrung out of me by experience. It was as if the subject matter imposed itself on me. My wife, my father, my mother, my sister, my friends and children all come into these little painting, as did my spiritual life and my horror of war.

The format stems from my time as a student in Italy where I was impressed by the narrative power of Italian painting, especially when these narratives were deployed as cycles of frescoes or as sequences of a story in a predella. Indeed, the Holy Communion predella was once the predella of a large crucifixion which, in a panic induced by the presence of my dealer, I spoilt. I think it is still somewhere in our attic.

While I was painting this predella, the child who was being born on the left, by then two years old, ran his fingers across it and said 'Look Daddy! Tram lines!' Luckily I only used simple pigments that do not seem to have done him any harm!

Lastly, my experiences of Italian cycles and predellas seem to have become embedded in my artistic personality. I do not feel I am doing anything really serious if I am not involved in some monstrous project that would be very hard to place anywhere. In fact, for rather more than thirty years I have been attempting to make a 'Life of Christ' in ninety-one scenes. I am now within four paintings of the end of my fourth try. All prayers and good wishes gratefully received!

(Stop Press: it was exhibited in Huddersfield's Northlight Gallery in July 2004.)

19. Jacques Iselin - The Elements of the Holy Communion

A tall painting of this size and format and with this degree of abstraction immediately reminds me of cubism particularly as practised by Braque, Picasso and Juan Gris. However instead of a newspaper, guitar and a bottle here we have the Eucharistic Elements, and instead of greys and blacks we have glowing yellows, oranges and reds. Nevertheless, the imposition of large, abstract, or perhaps abstracted, shapes upon one another and their juxtaposition with recognisable forms: the cloth, the chalice, the ears of the corn, the loaf of bread and the fish is straight forward cubism, as is the multi-positioned treatment of the chalice itself.

The phase of cubism represented by this painting insists that the canvas is flat and that its flatness must be respected all the time. It was a reaction against analytic cubism which manipulated and experimented with space and form to such an extent that the integration of the picture surface was threatened. The multiple view-points, or station points, of the painter, and so of the spectator, also threatened to wreak havoc with pictorial stability. The response of Picasso and Braque to this threat was robust and drastically painterly. Stability is reaffirmed by their magisterial command of their material as well as by the process of making flat screens recede back from the picture's surface, one behind another. In Braque's hands this eventually became a language which was capable of producing the vast lyrical achievement of his late works - particularly of his 'studio' series.

Cubism insists that a picture is a picture and that a painted form is just that and certainly not the object depicted, or any kind of direct imitation of it.

Iselin's painting is far more light and airy and delicate than the paintings it is derived from. The secret centre of its existence seems to me to be the delicate line that runs throughout the picture. This line is tender and thin - think for a moment how thick the lines often are in a similar Picasso - and it seems to be hidden beneath the juncture of the large, abstracted shapes as well as being visible around the loaf, the fish and the chalice. The rhythm or movement of the forms also distinguishes this picture from the work of other cubists. It is light-footed and elegant rather than dogmatically affirmative. But, above all, it is the kind of light we experience while looking at it that sets this painting apart. The pure white of the chalice almost literally glows and perhaps many Catholics are familiar with a kind of radiance that seems to be shed by the Blessed Sacrament. "And was it just the light of day that shone about us on our way" said Cleopas to the other disciple as they discuss their Journey to Emmaus with each other in later years.

20. Philip le Bas: The Stripping of Our Lord

Every Saturday during term time I teach at the Cardinal Wiseman School in Greenford - working with and for an old student of mine - Tom Davies, an artist, and perhaps the most brilliant and energetic teacher I have ever come across. I regard this as a great privilege. The church to which the school is attached has fourteen Stations of the Cross painted by Le Bas and I have been familiar with them for a long time. They are heavy, inelegant images, dark in feeling but very direct and forceful. I have often longed for them to be filled with more light and air and I confess I have the same feeling about this image.

We believe that our salvation has been made possible by the suffering of Jesus. This suffering was entirely real and more painful than our own to the extent that Jesus was more completely human than ourselves and more sensitive. But there is always something else, perhaps best summed up in another phrase from St John's gospel, "What shall I say : Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour." There is something redemptive, consoling and healing about Our Lord's Passion and throughout his terrible ordeal Jesus was walking in His Father's will which gives immense dignity to these events.

Since this image is called 'The Stripping of Our Lord' which is one of the Stations of the Cross, I read it in this way. Christ is standing and the form to his right on the left of his chest is the helmet of a soldier, seen in perspective, who is tearing the robe from him - one can see this soldier's hand in the bottom right hand corner pulling at what might be a piece of the robe. To the left of Christ another metal clad arm is visible. However, the image is ambiguous since Our Lord's side seems already to have been wounded - though this may have been caused by the scourging and it is not on his right side as Ezekiel said it would be when he wrote that 'the water flowed from under the right side of the temple.'

Another argument against this being a 'Disrobing' is that Our Lord could be seen as being already dead, so I think it is safest to regard this picture as a kind of synthesis of the Stations of the Cross, closely related to the Greenford set,

possibly summing them up either before or after the main set was painted. It could even be one that he subsequently replaced.

The forms emerge from the spread of thick paint whose colour scheme is dominated by black and white. The density of the paint stands for the intensity of the artist's feeling and we empathise with it.

21. Theyre Lee-Elliott - Crucified tree form - the agony

Lee Elliott was the son of an Anglican clergyman and as such he must have been brought up as a Christian, but his sister tells us that he was '...definitely not a practising Christian, and I am pretty sure he was not a believer.'

However, Lee-Elliott falls dangerously ill and on his recovery he feels he must paint crucifixes in which the image of Christ is fused with that of a tree. For a long time he had felt that trees were like human beings and at his moment *in extremis*, Jesus, trees and his own sufferings fuse into a single image, together with images taken from the two world wars he had lived through - such as barbed wire and decaying flesh. Surely these were his deepest feelings and his approach to death released a real faith - *De profundis* - out of the depths - though he could only express this faith as an image.

The yellow background of this piece surely records our intuitive recognition of the glory of Our Lord's divinity - though it is circled and besmirched by the shadow of death. Though only two kinds of pigments were used in this painting, in fact we have five colours here - the yellow, the white ground, black, grey formed by black smudged over white and the greeny-blacks formed by black smudged over yellow. A wide repertoire of black marks are deployed, the thin lines of the barbed wire crown, the smudges I have mentioned and heavy, black strokes that accrue into the blackness of Our Lord's dead face - I do not think anyone without faith could have invented the marvellous, glimmering halo around Our Lord's head which is formed by leaving glimpses of the base white free around His head. Even the black smudges radiate from it.

The more I study this piece the more passionate and inventive and surprisingly, the better drawn it becomes: the rib cage, the arms and even the loin cloth get more and more real and 'there' as I look at them. And so the devotional power of the image grows *De profundis*.

22. John Reilly : Cain and Abel

Cain glowers at Abel from his patch - the patch is fenced in order to prevent Abel's sheep from eating the crops but also to symbolise the self restricting action of jealousy. The four seasons, so important to a farmer are symbolised within this patch by daffodils for spring, a sunflower for summer, the rejected sheaf of corn and red leaves for autumn and a pile of dead twigs and a bare tree for winter. The contour of the patch is related rhythmically to the hallowed areas inhabited by Abel and his flocks. The patterning is very strong and, by a paradox, it sweeps us into the distance while making flat shapes on the surface of the canvas. Blue marks on the green grass and practically everywhere else, evoke atmosphere and space while reiterating and underlining the strong movement that flows through the piece.

Abel is, of course, a type of Christ and he is shown as being a good shepherd - that marvellous image taken up by Our Lord from the teaching of Ezekiel. A stalwart ram stands beside him as if to defend him from his brother's wrath

The pictorial language is basically linear for a free-flowing line gives rise to shapes which are filled with glowing colour. The colour has a home key of blue from which it modulates, via dull reds, towards the fanfare of yellow. The picture is divided into definite zones and then subdivided, especially in the case of Cain's patch where each seasonal area is haloed by coloured lines. It is interesting to note that Cain is digging in autumn when the sheaf would have been harvested. Soon however, he will leave and become a 'fugitive and a wanderer over the earth.'

23. John Reilly: The Feeding of the Five Thousand

This painting is also in a blue key, and again it modulates through various shifts and changes towards a yellow shirt. This time the shirt is worn by Our Lord.

The drawing is strongly, and quite openly influenced by Picasso but it is painted, or coloured, quite differently as the colour seems to slow down the linear rhythm which might otherwise have become hectic.

Largely delineated areas sweep across the picture space. The two main areas represent times before and after the miracle. In order, perhaps to make the pattern clearer and so as not to impede the linear interactions of the piece, the various forms are reduced to signs. That is, a hand and eye, a foot, a head and so on, are abstracted sufficiently to be digested by the pictorial pressure exerted by the rest of the piece. This reduction of forms to a language of signs with which the artist is then able to compose freely was something rejuvenated by Picasso - it is particularly apparent in *Guernica* .and it restates the common language of Byzantine and Romanesque art. So if we take a long view of this idiom it goes Byzantine and Romanesque - Christian - Picasso - strongly secular and Reilly Christian again.

Shapes can in themselves be expressive. Look at the joyous, four pointed star between the central figures on the left which is almost repeated a fifth lower, as it were, in a darker blue, between the two heads on the right of the group. Triangles and diamonds proliferate and all emphasise the joy of having enough physical and spiritual food. The geometry and colours of the 'before' hungry group are equally expressive in a different way.

The coloured patches are frequently qualified by subsequent patches - which are nearly always lower in tone. Our Lord's shirt, across which the division of the two main areas lies, has darker yellows tinged with a complimentary violet laid across its underlying yellow. This gives the colour a slowly smouldering quality that takes us directly into the required mood.

24. John Reilly: The healing of the lunatic Boy

Here again Reilly has given us an image of 'before' and 'after' but this time yellow is almost the home key. Its antithesis is the blue-grey which looks slightly violet because of the way our eyes react to very strong statements of colour - we tend to see the complementary of the strong colour - in this case a violet - into a relatively neutral expanse placed near or next to it. The only true violets in the painting are the shadowed areas of Our Lord's cuffs and other 'robes' which tell in quite a different way.

Reilly's language of signs is very apparent in this painting, indeed it could hardly go farther without becoming caricature - something that does happen in Picasso. Other influences besides that of Picasso seem to be present - Bernard Buffet, perhaps and maybe Giacometti's 'Painting Man', both seem to have affected the figure of Christ, but here again the secular has become sanctified.

Vertical and horizontal lines divide the space into definite areas which act in counterpoint to the more fluent lines of the figures. The effect is rather like that of a sturdy choral tune intruding on the baroque counterpoint of one of the 'numbers' of a Bach cantata. It steadies things up.

Every time a painting is made a process of selection takes place. One cannot paint all the leaves on a tree or tell all the ins and outs of a story. Reilly has concentrated on the distressed boy and his parents on the right and the child in his right mind together with Jesus on the left. The actual moment of healing is not shown, neither is the marvellous dialogue in St Luke's account between Our Lord and the father of the boy. 'Everything is possible for anyone who has faith' 'I do have faith. Help the little faith I have' or in another translation 'Lord I believe - help thou my unbelief'.

25. John Reilly: The Raising of Lazarus

John Reilly is clearly obsessed with pictorial language, an obsession that lays him open - in a positive as well as sometimes in a slightly negative way - to various influences. Picasso is a kind of archetype of this painterly mentality, but here Reilly is completely off the Picasso wagon and his work becomes much more original. Clearly the subject has dictated everything. The rising sun forms the centre of our field of vision and everything circulates about it. All the forms are bent up and round and over by the effects of wide angled vision - we find the same thing happening in Turner's last paintings. This circling vortex about the sun enables Lazarus to float free of his grave clothes with which he was bound head and foot. In an almost automatic and inevitable way, Christ is swept into the same whirlpool.

The image is clarified by being placed in a contemporary setting and by the figures being given contemporary clothes. There is a before and after sequence in this painting too. Mary and Martha - if the trousered figure is Martha - are shown both lamenting the death of Lazarus and rejoicing in his resuscitation.

The language of colour has developed enormously over the four years that separate this from the "Healing of the Lunatic Boy". It is unconstrained by linear limits and modulates from blue-black to white through grey-violets and russets towards the triumphant orange which vivifies the rising man and unites him with the sun.

26. Ceri Richards: The Supper at Emmaus

The yellow cross formed from light falling over the table, and of light itself divides the square format of the painting asymmetrically, for it is centred well to the left of the composition. This asymmetry is partially compensated for by the fact that the centre of the figure of Christ is situated to the right of the upright part of the cross. Only the right side of his head is, however, in the middle of the picture. It is worth responding to the divisions of this painting because they are clearly emphasised and obviously deeply considered.

For instance, the blue area to the left of Christ is a rectangle like but not geometrically similar to the yellow shape that surrounds Jesus. It is subdivided by a dark line which bounds a series of horizontal lines that must stand for a shutter. This blue area is echoed below by another which is again like but not similar to it. This lower area is divided by a horizontal line and part of the mat. You can continue this game for yourselves as much as you are inclined to do, or just let the patterned impact of the whole thing strike you.

Although these rectilinear areas are very strongly stated, some of them are partially masked by figures. For instance in the area at the top right hand corner above the table bounded by the central glow. This is not square but nearly

so. In fact areas like the shape to the left of the white jug that at first sight look square, turn out not to be. The body of the jug itself makes a white rectangle. All these rectangles are parallel to the edges of the square format of the painting and echo and reinforce it. Variety is given by harmonic sub divisions of the format which are never quite what one expects - together they make up what is actually an abstract painting.

The figures are deployed and drawn in a completely different idiom; they are intensely, even vulgarly physical with enormous hands and feet. They bless, move and revere with a vengeance and yet the painting as a whole does work - how is that? Well, this physicality is really carried by the contour everywhere except in the exposed areas of flesh which are firmly modelled. The insides of the figures are almost as plainly painted as the abstract surround, so they do sit down and interpenetrate with them. Also the shapes between those physical rhythms are as 'abstract' as any of the others. The shape, for instance between Christ's raised hand and the blue area of the near disciple slashes, diagonally, across the centre of the painting; the other arm of the same disciple crosses the yellow end of the table and the round, white plate in such a way as to set up near triangles and two segments of a circle. Discovering things like this is one way of reading a painting.

Personally I find the figures of the disciples more successful than the figure of Our Lord. Sometimes when trying to draw or paint Our Lord painters tend to project too much of their own personalities onto him. This figure is not really Christ-like because it is too complicated. It is the worried face of a man wrestling with some kind of inner disturbance. The huge self-conscious hands underline this psychological disturbance. However a painting of Our Lord that we do not think looks like him serves the purpose of making us visualise our Saviour for ourselves. The whole picture, though, is marvellously intelligent and well-ordered.

27. William Roberts: The Crucifixion

Perhaps the easiest way to look at this painting is to start with the sky, the distant trees and city, and the wall. These forms are not represented by a series of fluent curves but by a series of jerks that interact with each other - it is a bit like taking a ride in a square wheeled tram. The blue zig-zag of the wall, acting against the line formed by the meeting of the distant fields and hills, gives rise to an astringent, rather savage visual counterpoint which turns out to be mild compared to the violence going on in the foreground. Why is this? Well, the Crucifixion was perpetrated by savage men, or perhaps it is truer to say that it was perpetrated by men whose ideology had turned them into savages. Roberts had just finished painting his way through the First World War and his visual memory must have been loaded with savagery. Here he relates it to the crucifixion of Jesus. The figure of Christ is calmer. Although he too is affected by the jerky rhythms that run through the picture, he is essentially in control.

The pictorial language I have tried to describe derives partly from cubism, more from futurism and even more from the Vorticists. The picture it reminds me of most, is the almost abstract 'Mud Bath' by David Bomberg whose structure reminds one of the reiterated dissonances, ostinatos and hammered accents of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'.

This is a thoroughly modern work. I can hear the crunch of artillery and stammer of machine guns, despite the antique gear of the protagonists. Or, perhaps, their clothes help to emphasise the horrible connection between then and now. God help us - what are we doing?

It is a very fine painting.

28. Peter Rogers: The Mocking of Christ

The densely packed group of figures from the cohort, which had been 'called together', make up a single chunk of horrible masculinity. It is extended below the figure of Christ by the mockery of the character on the ground. At He together with the figure of Our Lord, forms an 'L' shape that repeats the right angle of the canvas and so welds Jesus into the compact mass of the painting. His figure, heavily influenced by Georges Rouault (and why not?) does manage to be separated from the yobbish soldiers by a small gap and by the reed in his hand. Rogers' has managed to keep his figure self-contained, quiet and still.

The group of soldiers forms a hollow square, one end of which is formed by Christ. In the centre of the group a spokesman mocks Christ with words from Isaiah. 'If the virtuous man is God's Son, God will take his part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies. Let us test him with cruelty and torture and thus explore this gentleness of His and put His endurance to the test.'

29. Peter Rogers: The Ascension

'Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking at the sky? Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there'. This translation emphasises the difference between 'sky' and 'heaven' but Jesus was 'lifted up while they looked on', and 'a cloud' did take him from their sight. How on earth can we paint this subject?

Rogers' theology is unorthodox but I can only see this as a thoroughly orthodox interpretation. What one sees is what one sees, and I see Christ rising up what seems like the neck of an hourglass into the cloud. Was this not the same cloud that covered the tabernacle in the wilderness; that visited the newly consecrated people; that overshadowed Mary and that hung over Our Lord and His disciples at the Transfiguration?

Rogers has a marvellous ability to realise three dimensional forms in painting: the 'hour glass' I have mentioned, could also be a vase with a fiery ball placed on top of it. I am using these mundane images in order to emphasise the fact that this picture is made up of three, as well as of two, dimensional areas. The compact clump of disciples is another such mass as is that formed by the two angels: their fiery trail and flowing receptacle are also deployed in three dimensions.

Realised forms imply a realised space, and I think that the great advance made by Rogers over the last picture I discussed lies in his treatment of space. Here the space is as real and as palpable as the forms. The atmosphere is dense with meaning and it surrounds and penetrates the groups of figures. I find this painting beautiful.

34 - 35. Georges Rouault: Love One Another and Obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross

When I was what I now think of as a very young man I did fairly frequent broadcasts in a series called 'Painting of the month.' On one occasion I was sent to Birmingham to choose something from the gallery there to talk about. My usual tactic was to wander round a gallery looking at paintings and wait until I was really moved by one before starting to draw it. As I drew I often found phrases coming into my head which ran parallel to my feelings about the painting. I think this happens – it still does - because I am an art teacher and the only way I know how to teach drawing is to draw and use words at the same time. Somehow this seems to work. At any rate on this occasion in Birmingham I was captured by one of the prints from Rouault's Miserere and a very nice curator led me upstairs to a fascinating store room that in my memory was like a greenhouse with galleries running round a central space.

Here I was given a table and the whole set of Miserere et Geurre - all fifty-eight of them, I felt like someone who was expecting to pick up a light object but on trying to lift it found that it was too heavy to move. Rouault really is massive. I think with Van Gogh, El Greco and Fra Angelico he is one of my favourite artists. There is so much to him.

I know of no other artist who can load so much meaning into a mark. These sumptuous blacks always seem to me to speak from the depths - it is as though I know and love the man himself.

Rouault was humble and saw painting very much as the servant of the church. I was at a retreat recently taken by the very old founder of the Little Brothers of St John - Père Philippe. While I was there I took the opportunity of questioning Père Philippe about Rouault whom he had known. Père Philippe had written a lot about art and philosophy and he explained that Rouault had told him not to bother about art which was not a sufficiently important subject for a priest to be concerned with. This is a very different attitude to that of a painter like Stanley Spencer who saw himself as the high priest of his own religion - the church of ME!

Rouault is a master of all the elements in painting that I care about. A stately linear movement runs through everything and this movement is involved with forms that move: the intervals and divisions he makes across the picture surface resonate out to the edges of the picture and return with added strength and his colour speaks of love, suffering and redemption. I can particularly remember a great red beat of pain-suffused colour above the drooping head of a Man of Sorrows. Rouault did not hide from his own nature but his human passions were sublimated and supernaturalised by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Word was made Flesh in the person of Jesus Christ so the Flesh was made Word in the person of his disciple George Rouault.

The extraordinary thing about Rouault's prints is that they are every bit as profound and every bit as colourful as his paintings. The terrible battering these plates have endured to produce these qualities - these textures, these lights and darks only confirm the peace and submission to the divine life that lies at their heart. The extraordinary meeting of That which always Is with our created nature in the person of Jesus obsessed Rouault. It is as if he worked with nothing but faith and faith is a supernatural gift.

I do not want to analyse these prints - they are too big for me - but simply to share my love for them with you.

36. F N Souza: The Crucifixion

Our Lord lived, died and rose between the East and the West and it is good to have the view from the East. How does it differ from our view, if at all? Souza is, of course only one of many oriental artists each of whom are unique, so it is dangerous to read too much into his situation. Goa, where he came from is an ancient Catholic community possibly founded by St Thomas so his roots are as deep as our own. Despite this, it is the newness and freshness of de Souza's vision that strikes me. Something in the best sense 'childlike' informs these three figures. The flatness of India miniature painting has been maintained, but instead of realising this flatness through fastidious layers of tempera it is achieved by applying masses of paint and then drawing into them. This drawing is really exciting - everywhere I look it takes hold of me and swings me about : the figure with the raised hand on the left has one line running down the inside of his arm and then across his tummy..... how fast it goes!

I see the figure on the right of the picture as male and as being a prophet - like Baalam son of Beor or Isaiah. His four eyes see past, present, future and possibly eternity too!. One can imagine him saying 'the oracle of man with far seeing eyes, the oracle of the man who hears the word of God. He sees what Shaddai makes him see, receives the divine answer and his eyes are opened! He is clearly in a state of contemplation, his head bowed in prayer. The other figure has his normal eyes closed and what look like four extra ones on his forehead. Personally I see him as

another prophet as he does not feel like an apostle. I wonder if these two figures could be Moses and Elijah who spoke with Our Lord about his coming Passion on the mountain of the Transfiguration? These are rather wild surmises - but then why not make them? After all art is supposed to stimulate our imaginations. At any rate 'Elijah' is appropriately clothed in red and at the time of Our Lord's Passion, the tombs were opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead. Elijah, of course, was already in heaven, body and soul.

The colour is made of simple slabs of blue, yellow, red and blue grey. White and black are both used to draw into these slabs and as with all good painting, the more one looks the better and the more articulate it gets. The complimentary 'wobbles' of the two standing figures are drawn precisely as is the magnanimous self-giving of Christ. His eyes are wide open and He is very much in the 'now' of his redemptive achievement. I find the apparently improvised drawing entirely successful - what a splendid head of the God/Man with His crown of thorns and His halo! This picture is a big yes to the appeal of Jesus.

37. Euryl Stevens: The Raising of Lazarus

This is a remarkably faithful painting by a woman who has said 'I can't remember a time when I ever believed.' She seems to be in rather a similar position to that of Lee-Elliott - faith happened in terms of an image when she was in extremis. Her extremis seems to have been caused by the death of her much loved father. But I know he is still alive, her picture says to me and surely this 'knowing' is faith - for he could not be alive if he were not encircled by the 'everlasting arms' of Christ which we see to the left and right.

There is a kind of painting loosely and rather misleading called 'primitive' of which the customs officer Rousseau is the greatest example. There are many others: Vivier is one and someone like Alfred Wallis is a marginal case. This sort of painting does not usually deal with weight and mass but rather with an even spread across the painted surface which is often filled with detail. The death of such painting would come about through the least pretence, or faux-naïvité. There is nothing false here and it achieves a surreal intensity somewhat reminiscent of Magritte. But why attempt to categorise it at all? It is entirely sincere, the story is very clearly told, it is meticulously done and for such a serious subject great fun. I love the progression from the tomb to the glorified body of Lazarus - incidentally it is a glorified body not a resuscitated one as was that of the historical Lazarus. It is about her father's spiritual state in heaven and as he will be after general resurrection.

I am excited by the movement of the crowd towards us starting from the scattered figures on the distant hill. They are reinforced by the forward drift of the clouds and both seem to be beckoned forward by the gestures of Christ's hands at the same time as these same hands are raising Lazarus.

Mary and Martha pop up out of the crowd with big smiles. Surely one of them must be Euryl Stevens and the other her sister or mother? No, she is not one of the Egyptian animal-headed creatures who do not believe. She could not have painted this picture if she was.

38. Graham Sutherland: The deposition

Sutherland's early paintings seem to be about moments of intense feeling which occurred while he was immersed in the country. He seemed to be a landscape painter in the tradition of Samuel Palmer. These paintings were mystical rhapsodies rather than objective studies. Something happened to him - perhaps it was the war or perhaps his original vision faded - that led him to move out of this private world into the public domain. He started to paint religious themes, larger landscapes and eventually official portraits. However, there is one recurrent theme in his work - an interest in twisted, convoluted forms. His landscapes are dominated by cactus and thorn and a personal rhythmic twist crops up everywhere. The things that distinguish his latter from his earlier work are larger scale, a

plain, easy to read format and simple colour. He found out that he had to comment on the Nazi atrocities and embody his feelings about them in works that were accessible to ordinary people. It seems he felt a real responsibility about this and he found support in the paintings of Grunewald who faced suffering without flinching and whose twisted forms and stark colour appealed to Sutherland.

“I tell you solemnly that in so far as you did this to the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” Our Lord will say to this to the saved, but the reverse is also true. It was Jesus who was re-crucified at Buchenwald, and human nature which can apparently become completely depraved in a couple of days, committed these atrocities - it seems we all could. How can an artist respond to facts like this? Primo Levi says that it is impossible to mention providence after the holocaust.

Sutherland did not see it that way. His response was to point to the fact that the victims of the holocaust were so many Christs and in order to do so he represented a victim who could be either Jesus or some other Jew being lowered into a tomb in ‘concentration camp and like’ surroundings. He has had the artistic tact not to force this image on us, but just to present us with the plain, simple facts. The face is left blank - it could be anyone, but it is always Jesus. The Cross overshadows us all.

Postscript

I feel that I have benefited a great deal from studying these works in the Methodist Collection. I have a hope that I am one of a team that has been led along different paths to the same place. This diminishes the lonely responsibility of being an artist. In an increasingly hostile environment a Christian artist simply has to go on working - whether our work piles up in a gallery or an attic is not our business. We bear witness to the truth in our own way, and if the world does not want to know we must still go on.

From a more practical standpoint I think it is important that we keep drawing and painting from nature as well as out of our head because if we only work away from nature the work of other artists can become too important to us. I feel that art must always be checked against nature and then our imaginative intuitions will be fresher and more original. If we draw, the example of others should feed rather than dominate us.

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