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New Ecclesiastical Architecture

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by Rudolf Schwarz

The wish of many of our contemporaries is to serve "life" in all they do – including those whose conception of architecture is functional and rational. That is forgetting that the laws of life, far from being the result of deduction, are even laid down by life itself, those of art included.

Where church architecture is concerned, the fact that the church is the scene of the cult is axiomatic. The concern of what is known as the "liturgical movement" was to recall the importance of this fact and to attempt a return to the primitive liturgy, by trying, for example, to bring together the altar and the communion of the faithful, "brethren", as one might say, to be united round the sacred "table". (The writer took these ideas into account in the transformation of the "Burg Rotenfels" and for the "Fronleichnamskirche", a church which was originally conceived as a hall.) But a liturgical functionalism is to be avoided, for it would be no less mistaken than the other. The church conceived as a hall and as a circle does not exhaust the possibilities and not only do the practical circumstances of worship allow of others (for example the long nave of the church envisaged as a "way": the processional church) but, as the writer has shown in his book "Vom Bau der Kirche" (1938), all these considerations arise from the fundamental fact that the congregation crystallizes into forms that are supra-personal, these themselves being the architectural expression of the community that gave rise to them.

Here "aesthetic" considerations are left on one side, unless this may be called the beginning of a new aesthetic.

At this point church building ceases to be an affair for specialists and becomes a problem which in itself yields profound insight into that which defines the essence of architecture and art in general, including too the human condition. As the place where the faithful meet for worship the church shows that on the sacred plane at least, architecture has its source in the community, in the heart's humility, and that what we call art is born of that faculty which leads the community to form as it were a collective eye contemplating infinity. The problem of architecture is to discover the adequate social form, which is always simple as a primary mathematical figure. But it would be quite false and an over-simplification if we were to consider these applications from a doctrinal standpoint. There is not only one fundamental form but several, with which the builders can play as a musician with his scale – a multiple richness which in its turn is a cosmos.

The Church at Assy in Haute-Savoie

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by Abbé Jean Devémy

On the Assy plateau, 7 kms. from Passy, a sort of French Leysin (a health resort for T. B.) has been formed, which necessitated the building of a new church. This was built from 1938 to 1941, of local materials (wood, granite) in a traditional style, with a single square bell tower and a crypt. As for the decoration, the writer's discovery of Rouault on the occasion of a Paris exhibition of stained glass windows in 1937 and the important role played in the undertaking by the R. P. Couturier, director of "L'Art Sacré", made possible a collection of the works of the greatest living artists: Rouault for the windows, Lurcat for the tapestries, Bonnard, Matisse, Braque, Fernand Léger, Lipschitz and others. A fine example of the harmony possible between the church and art as these artists were left in perfect liberty to create according to their inspiration.

Northampton and Modern Ecclesiastical Art

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by Manuel Gasser

Northampton, three hours by train from London, has suddenly become a place of pilgrimage for art lovers, not at all

because of its Norman Church, nor because of its Town-hall in the post-Cromwellian style, but because of St. Matthew's church. From an architectural point of view this church, built towards 1890, is merely a simple neo-gothic edifice, but its interest lies in the Madonna of Henry Moore and the Crucifixion by the painter Graham Sutherland. How were two artists, the subject of so much controversy and so resolutely modern, brought to work for the parish of St. Matthew's? And above all how did the parish come to commission them? This little miracle – which is very encouraging from the point of view of the possible co-operation between religion and living art – is due to the initiative of the Rector of St. Matthews, The Rev. Walter Hussey, and also to the consent which he managed to obtain from his flock, who decided in fact to pay Moore by utilising a sum donated to the parish, and Sutherland, by using money collected for this purpose in an alms box. What is more, in 1947 the great modern poet W. H. Auden wrote for this church, Benjamin Britten composed for it, and the singer Kirsten Flagstad went to sing there and hopes to return. Thus it would seem that social life and authentic art are not as incompatible as our contemporaries often imagine.

The Art of Stained Glass Windows

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by Otto Staiger

The art of stained glass is an exclusively European phenomenon which appeared about the year one thousand. The oldest church windows still in existence (Le Mans, Poitiers) reveal such perfection that one is compelled to admit the existence of a well-developed anterior tradition. Except in Italy, which remained faithful to the fresco, the church window became the essential surface element. The following figures will give an idea of the immensity of this work: at the beginning of the second world war the "French Historical Monuments Service" placed in safety 50,000 sq. metres of windows. We must also think of the primitive conditions of work in the Middle Ages: no paper for draughts but boards, no "diamond" to cut the glass, no machines to stretch the leads. The number of glaziers and their assistants would certainly equal that of the masons when a cathedral was being built. Then came the Renaissance. Perspective resulted in the decline of stained glass windows, which disappeared in the 18th century. It was only when modern art broke with pictorial art as an imitation of space in three dimensions and made the surface important again, that the church window could reappear. Now the essential problem is to state the principles governing the treatment of big glass surfaces in buildings sacred or profane. Whether one likes it or not, the church window is ornamental and not pictorial. Instead of ordering it at the last moment it would be far better to plan it from the beginning in co-operation with the architect. There is no lack of artists conversant with this art today.

The Rebuilding of the Protestant Church at Thalwil,
near Zürich

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by Ernst Stockmeyer

On the whole the reconstruction of this church, destroyed by fire in 1942, is highly satisfactory. The original building (1846–1847) was the latest example of the "pulpit church" as conceived in that region at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. The present church still emphasizes this rational element. However, two criticisms would seem permissible: the organ might have been smaller, and, on the other hand, it would perhaps have been more suitable to place the pulpit more openly in the axis, the focal point of the Protestant service. The bell tower might also be criticised. On the whole, however, thanks to the care taken in the spacing, in the material execution, and in the use made of the immediate surroundings, one cannot but approve of this harmonious and worthy realisation.