

ART AND THE CHURCH IN AMERICA.

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THE question of art in the Christian church is almost as old as the church itself. As early as the fourth century it was a burning question in the Byzantine world. Again in the eighth century, when the church had gone so far as to worship images, Emperor Leo III had all art removed from the churches and its use for ecclesiastic purposes prohibited.

However, the church continued to foster art in one way or another through the succeeding centuries, the finest flower coming in the Italian Renaissance.

That Christian art soon differentiated itself from pagan art is but natural. A glance at the Apollo Belvedere and the Sistine Madonna tells the story.

A reaction against what was believed to be an abuse of art in the church set in during the Reformation period, and we find early in the sixteenth century, in the wake of the Peasants' War, an iconoclastic movement raging in northwestern Germany, devastating church edifices and destroying or turning into money all the art treasures.

What the fanatic hordes did here, Zwingli and Calvin did for the Reformed church in Switzerland,—in more orderly fashion, to be sure, but just as effectively. Of the Protestant church as a whole since the Reformation, one can hardly say that it has fostered art in the sense in which the medieval church did so, although at times art did spring up within its sheltering fold, while Puritanism, Methodism, and all the pietistic churches positively spurned art, and do so to this day.

This was the result principally of a reactionary movement against certain abuses of art and ritual, as well as a conviction that the use of art in the house of worship is contrary to the doctrine of worshipping "in the spirit and in truth."

Is this of necessity so? History records that the abuse of art in the church at one time stood in the way of the true spirit of devotion. But many good things are at times abused. Shall all men refrain from meat because a too great use of it has given some one bad nerves?

The church has been a great patron of art in times gone by. This is one of her crowning glories. Take, for instance, the rôle it has played in the development of architecture. The heavy, awkward Gothic style which spread from Italy to Sicily, France, and the rest of Europe, was so crude that the artists of the Italian Renaissance dubbed it "Gothic," i. e., the "barbarian" style. And what a glorious instrument the Christian church made of it!

Or again, instance the impulse to art as shown in Protestant Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Albrecht Dürer, Holbein, Cranach and the Netherland School gave us their undying works under the inspiration of the new gospel!

But Protestantism has, in the main, been a drawback to art and principally for three reasons: its traditional aversion to images in the church; its aversion to sensuous forms (and art is impossible without these); and a medieval ascetic notion that man's joys should be exclusively in the things of the soul, never in the things of sense.

What a sad descent from the Old World cathedral with its untold riches, the immortal work of the old masters, where every nook and cranny even tells the story of the unswerving devotion of some pious artist's soul far back in the centuries: the massive pillar, pointing heavenward, the wealth of sculpture and color on wall and pilaster, the thousand inspiring forms surrounding and permeating the worshiper as he bows in reverence before his Maker! What a descent from this to the bleak, uniform walls, the oftentimes rectangular form of our American houses of worship!

The reason for this? Tradition!

Is this adherence to tradition warranted? Is it justifiable? The church has at all times been a most conservative institution, which fact explains but does not justify the attitude taken.

In how far does the presence of art-subjects detract from the spirit of devotion? I sit in my study. Before me hang the Victory, Mona Lisa or the Farnese Hercules. Does their presence impair my concentration? Not in the least! They have been before me too long. My glance falls upon them only in passing. But I would not be without them. They are my companions!

The same case in the nursery. The Madonna of Gabriel Max and the Baby Stuart do not now excite the children. They have

been there for some time. They do not distract their attention from their books. But the atmosphere and the spirit of the pictures are sinking daily deeper into the souls and minds of the children. Shall we remove the pictures?

Take the ordinary American church for instance. Remove the meaningless and distracting scroll work and frippery from the walls; cover them with a plain, pleasing tint, give us a few fine reproductions of the old masters, large enough to be discernible at a distance, and they will be doing their silent work whether the sermon is good or not! The attention of churchgoers will be drawn from the sermon only during the first service—but even so, the distraction will be no worse than that occasioned by a prominent new hat.

Let not the money argument be advanced here. Let us settle whether or not art shall receive our sanction, and the money question will take care of itself. Rather let us begin, as the means allow, with good reproductions, and later on buy the best to be had and employ the best talent accessible. Means are not lacking in our thrice-blessed land, and they will be forthcoming, once the taste for art, and art in the church, has been awakened.

In the Middle Ages, artists did their best work for the church. It was a form of worship with them. In the devotion of his soul Fra Angelico wrought his undying frescoes on the walls of San Marco and Albrecht Dürer filled his canvases with the glory of God! How glorious if the future historian could say as much of American artists in the twentieth century!

The church has a mission in this. It must employ and encourage its own, and any other great talent in the realm of art. It must not allow the "world" to usurp the great field of art as it has sometimes done, much to its detriment. But this is, whether we will admit it or not, precisely what the Christian church is doing to-day in America.

And moreover, the constituents of the church desire the uplift of art. They believe they are right in demanding in the house of worship art at least as good as that offered them in the saloons, the restaurants, and the theaters.