

artistic traditions with the Catholic Church is becoming widespread in this country. Predictions for the future are largely optimistic.

Within the last ten years, the Catholic Church has made some progress toward acceptance of the rich contemporary tradition of American art. The clergy and the artist have had to overcome problems, both individual ones and those of the groups they represent, in order to communicate with each other. Favorable results are isolated. Success is often counter-balanced by the failure of so many American communities to awaken to a clear recognition of the situation.

Clergy, professionals, and laymen are increasingly aware of the fact that no one group is able to see the entire question in all its complexity, and that there is a need for consultation and communication between all three before any meaningful progress will be made. Perhaps there will be an agency established in the near future, a Catholic council of the arts, which will mediate and evaluate the demands of the changing artistic and cultural approaches and provide well-informed advice for communities who wish their church building to be one which will reflect its Christian, American, mid-twentieth-century character. This will be the fruit of a communication process which is now lacking.

## Recent Publications

*THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARTIST.* By Jacques Maritain. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1960.

Rarely does an art-maker feel inclined to open a book about art, even in novelized form. Even more rarely would he attempt to read a book about art written by a philosopher. Art seen from the outside and art art felt from the inside are such different things. To loosely quote once against the quotable Mark Twain: "The bug knows more about the business of bugs than does the entomologist."

This is not another book about art, however, but one that deals with artists. When a master of Maritain's stature chooses to speak about art-makers, the art-maker may profitably run the gauntlet of Maritain's philosophy to try and find out what he has to tell him. I say

'run the gauntlet' because the professional tool of the philosopher, his probing scalpel, is a language wherein words are chosen for their meaning only, a language that shuns equally the poet's music and the painter's imagery.

While it is an uphill exercise for an artist far from metaphysically inclined to follow a reasoning of such impeccable and undeviating clarity, it may also prove artificial for Maritain to act native to the world of the artist, solidly based on irrationalities. With poets, the author at least shares the use of words. It is harder for him to focus on the painter, and as to the sculptor he prefers to leave him alone. Compared with the thin air of philosophical heights, the air that the practicing artist breathes is in truth a thicker and a denser air, clogged with the stench of that sensuousness that is the trademark of all art-makers.

Vocational differences notwithstanding, it is well for the while to loosen our grip on brush or chisel, and for a moment to digress from our stolid communion with stone, or wood, or canvas. In spite of its forbidding title, this book shall come to us as a tonic surprise. It does not attempt to duplicate in words those familiar sights, the rod of the moralist and the wagging finger of the bourgeois. At the end of our reading, we shall gratefully that, for Maritain, artists are not after all the most expendable kind of humans.

Clear thinking need not hide a loving heart. Even though his business is to probe, Maritain does it so deftly that no bruising and little hurt follow his organic explorations. Especially never does the reader who is also an artist feel that he is assisting at his own post-mortem. Fairly enough, often enough, quotes straight from the mouth of artists are scattered through the text as a sort of counterpoint to the author's assertions. The touchy specimen, even while he is being probed, is given a healthy chance to squirm, and even to bellow a repartee, as did Rouault to the well-meaning questioner who wished his art more pleasing: "Get out and leave me alone, you fool!" (page 36)

There is no easy diagnosis and no cure-all remedy. The author describes live tissue and breathing matter, not the easily differentiated reds and blues of an anatomical chart. Under Maritain's lucid and respectful scrutiny the artist as an entity remains mostly inviolate. One gathers that other types, the politician or the businessman, could

be more easily pulled apart and gathered together again. A theologian once told me — I hope he was a bad theologian or at least an inarticulate one — that angles, once they are set, are forever immovable and unchangeable, because they are not made of parts. In this book, artists appear as even more mulishly inclined than any such cast-iron angels. "To support his family, an artist may have to become a farmer, or a customs officer, or even to give up art. He can never accept to be a bad artist, and spoil his work." (page 36)

Has Maritain befriended only this type of heroic artist, or else does he choose to call artists only men of such heroic casts? Facts are otherwise. Many a man born an artist is eroded by the world, but not to the point of ceasing to be an artist. It can be through the temptation of success, or a desire for social intercourse, or a promise of material reward. What he works at must still be classified as art, even though it is an art polluted, shrunken to his own unheroic size. An example was Sargent, so gifted, so clairvoyant, that he could both paint socially flattering portraits and despise himself for doing it. In our time, pressure is exerted mostly through the art dealer, who holds a key to the art market. Grown old, a master shall repeat forms now empty, once the truthful expression of his youthful ecstasy. In the aesthetic world, these mangled artists correspond to sinners in the moral world. Perhaps there is too much of a puritanical haste in this otherwise gentle book to cast these men outside its scope and into outer darkness. Most artists, alas, fall short of a heroic practice of aesthetic virtues as most of us, artists or not, fall short of sanctity.

Maritain's exacting definition of the artist is not plucked down from fancies, however. Rather it blends into a type of those artists he has known personally. Among them, he must feel closer to borderline cases, men who painted or drew, and did it well, but who remained first of all literateurs, Léon Bloy and Max Jacob. The professionals he knows, among them Rouault, are members of the School of Paris. Most of them true masters, but also a very specialized lot of men, one that would have puzzled many a master artist of past eras. The typical Parisian painter of the twentieth century is as clearcut a type as a stage Pantaloon, or the Gilles of the eighteenth century pantomimes. His roots are romantic. He sits in solitude in front of his easel, brush in hand. That hand

shall move only at the call of inspiration. Then the vision shall be spilled on canvas hurriedly before it has time to cool off. His stock-in-trade is innovation and experimentation. He is a very late comer to the world of art.

One could wish for a broader, a more embracing definition of what is an artist, and that is why, at the beginning of this review, I used the term 'art-maker' in preference to 'artist'. For centuries art of a high order came into being without benefit of artists, at least of the genre accepted today as typical. Teamwork was the natural way of working for the builders and hewers of cathedrals. And so it was doubtless for the marble-masons who carved the frieze of the Parthenon. These men, who thought of themselves as craftsmen, would marvel to realize that they are brothers under the skin to the amoral and asocial fellow we visualize as the artist. Art itself, at least in the sense we use the word, is a late comer to our thoughts. The title of Cennino Cennini's book "*Il Libro dell'Arte*" is better translated into English as "*The Craftsman's Handbook*." Art produced unwittingly, as it were, is even more a mystery than art produced under the blatant label of art. Perhaps some day Maritain will apply his powers to elucidate for us that important riddle: what made the artist tick when he did not even know that he was an artist. when humility and the making of art went hand in hand.

Of heroic cast as he may seem when seen from inside, especially with Maritain's appreciative eye, the artist shrinks in size when seen from the outside, as nonartists see him. It does matter but little if the artist shakes his fist at society or dutifully attempts to be a good citizen. Rarely does he manage an entirely successful protective coloration. As Maritain considers the relationship of the artist with the society he lives in, his lovingness becomes tinged with pity. The artist is least among citizens, mostly expendable. He can be suppressed outright or thrown outside the city walls. Nowadays solution of a less black and white hue are accepted. Speaking of dictatorships, Maritain remarks: "The State does not expel Homer, as Plato naïvely wanted. It tries to domesticate him." (page 76) Perhaps here the opprobrium should not land on Hitler and on Stalin only. Democracies are not immune. Many an American artist, either gently through success, or harshly through need, has been put to domesticated paces, mostly in the field of com-

mercial art. He learns to subordinate his gifts to the requirements of soft-sell and hard-sell, and labors a lifetime at the apotheosis of soaps and deodorants.

Maritain has little patience with an art whose contents bypass art. "Art for the social group becomes thus, inevitably, propaganda art." (page 63) The scorn should be qualified, especially when Maritain, in another part of the book states very good reasons against the theory of art for art. In other moments of art history, propaganda was thought of as a sound enough ingredient of art, and certainly the one obvious reason for producing art. Today's more exquisite approach implies a certain decadent attitude, compared with the more robust one of other centuries. Articulate eloquence, the communication with line and color of a thesis, can also be expressive of the inner artist, as expressive as these accepted ingredients of the art of today, inarticulate musings or expletives of passion. So ingrained was a social sense, warped or not, among my friends the Mexican muralists, that propaganda art flowed out of them naturally, without the motor of an outside compulsion as naturally as did the moments and seasons from the brush of Monet. This is true of other kinds of propaganda art. It is doubtful that Fra Angelico would have been a better artist, had he been forbidden the field of liturgical art.

Maritain's concern, perhaps his main reason for writing this book, turns to the relation of morality and art. One kind of morality happens squarely in the path of the artist at work, the morality of the craftsman intent on constructing a solid piece of goods. Maritain evokes here a curious situation. When the work of the artist, done along the lines of his morality, offends the moral sense of a non-artist, the scandal can be corrected only at the price of another scandal. A hasty patching up of the work of art would warp its quality, and make it immoral by the craftsman's standards.

This brings us to problems of censorship. Maritain sees little natural affinity between the prudent man, who stops and ponders before acting, and the artist who, if he stopped and pondered, could not act. If chosen wisely, a censor, by definition, would be a prudent man. Artist and censor shall remain at odds. As the artist defends himself, the censor refuses to believe him and his wagging finger does not cease to wag. As the censor in turn explains his point of

view, the artist, by now convinced of the man's obtuseness hardly takes time off his work to listen to what the censor has to say. Censors and artists have been at this tug-of-war ever since. In the sixteenth century, Veronese was brought before the tribunal of the Inquisition, charged with indecency with undertones of heresy. Mingling with more orthodox guests at Our Lord's Supper, Veronese had painted hunchbacks, drunkards, and German halberdiers. He was solemnly cautioned to mend his ways. The shy defense of the artist is not as casual as its wording implies. It contains in fact the gist of Maritain's argument: "Painters always have had license for certain things, as is understood of poets and of fools."

However awesome its accessories, the Holy Tribunal that bid Veronese mend his ways was one made of humans. Today, as holds true in so many other fields, machine tabulations seem to have replaced men. These faceless judges do not give the artist even the small leeway to answer that Veronese felt he had. The A's, and B's, and C's, with which the morality of art is tabulated are doubtless grounded on prudent motives. How slightly do they dovetail, as a rule, with aesthetic ratings!

Is there then, a sort of impending damnation in the artist's vocation, as there is a sort of impending salvation in a monastic vocation? Maritain's hopeful answer is that there are many kinds of perfections. Granted that the prudent man and the theologian are not on easy speaking terms with the artist, another perfectionist, the mystic, happens to be. Maritain defines thus the mystical experience: "Perfection consists in loving, in going through all that is unpredictable, dangerous, dark, demanding, and insensate in love" (page 42). The parallel with the aesthetic experience is obvious.

Some of us remain terrified by the difficulties of our calling, and genuinely conscious of the moral danger inherent in the sensual approach to the world that is our working tool. The temptation to court salvation by denying our specialized vocation should remain only a temptation. We may find hope in Maritain's quotation after Francis Thompson: "Among all the temptations wherewith he (the devil) tempted Saint Anthony, though we have often seen it stated that he howled, we have never seen it stated that he sang" (page 110).

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