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STILL SMALL VOICE: BRITISH BIBLICAL ART IN A SECULAR AGE (1850-2014) from the AHMANSON COLLECTION

PINATUBO PRESS

STILL SMALL VOICE

BRITISH BIBLICAL ART IN A SECULAR AGE (1850-2014)



from the AHMANSON COLLECTION

THE WILSON
CHELTENHAM ART GALLERY & MUSEUM 2015

Still Small Voice: British Biblical Art in a Secular Age (1850-2014) presents noteworthy works of art from the collections of Howard and Roberta Ahmanson that explore the role of Christianity in visual art in Great Britain. The exhibition covers a diverse range of media, including major paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture by some of the most important and beloved twentieth-century British artists, such as Henry Moore, Stanley Spencer, Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth, Edward Burra, and Graham Sutherland. A major goal of the exhibition is to deepen an understanding of the vital role the visual arts and beauty played in shaping human experience and awareness of the sacred in an era that witnessed unprecedented devastation and suffering.

STILL SMALL VOICE

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British Biblical Art in a Secular Age (1850-2014)
from the Ahmanson Collection

THE WILSON
Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum 2015



LYRICA TAYLOR

PINATUBO PRESS

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STILL SMALL VOICE: BRITISH BIBLICAL ART IN A SECULAR AGE (1850-2014)

Biblical images are not the first things that come to mind when one hears the term “20th-Century Art.” But, the works in this show are evidence that some of the best British artists of roughly the first half of the 20th Century did indeed draw on biblical images to convey their vision. Even in our secular age, British artists found that biblical imagery often best communicated their vision.

Beyond that, though, the viewer may wonder what a couple in Southern California are doing collecting British art, mostly painting and a few sculptures, primarily from the decades just before they were born. The answer is both simple and complicated. My husband, Howard, and I were formed by the British writers C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Add T.S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, and G.K. Chesterton to my particular case, and you can see that British thinking was clearly on my mind. Further, Howard came from a family that collected art; I discovered I loved art, particularly painting, when I was in the 8th grade in middle school in Iowa in the heartland of the United States. So, when we started traveling to explore the world, partly because we are both just plain curious and partly because we wanted to understand the world so as to be better stewards, I was particularly drawn to art museums and churches, and, sometimes reluctantly, Howard came along.

Then came Stanley Spencer. An idiosyncratic man who read the Bible daily, went to church regularly, believed in free love, and divorced the mother of his two daughters for another woman, Spencer (d. 1959) was one of the great British artists of the first half of the 20th Century. We were asked to sponsor the first major show of Spencer’s work in the United States. “Stanley Spencer: An English Vision” opened at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1997. Before we agreed to do the show, however, I visited Spencer sites in England, namely Cookham and Sandham Memorial Chapel, and traveled to both British and Australian museums to see his work. Impressed and fascinated by this contradictory man, I also saw how important it was that he embraced the Bible and was driven to paint its images in contemporary British settings. Curious to understand his context, I researched other artists of his period. That led to looking at the work of his contemporaries, which led to collecting their work, which, in turn, led to this show, the first time for the collection to be seen in Britain.

Lyrca Taylor, Assistant Professor at Azusa Pacific University in California, has done a masterful job curating the show and writing the catalog. Angus Pryor, head of the School of Art and Design at the University of Gloucestershire, skillfully designed the show and contributed an essay. Ben Quash, Professor of Christianity and the Arts, King’s College London, has kindly written for the catalog. Jane Lillystone, Museum, Arts and Tourism Manager at the Wilson, had the original vision for the show and carried it through with her usual verve. Without them, “Still Small Voice” would not have been possible.

More than anything, this show reflects the living power of ancient images, rooted in a profound vision of the nature of reality. What we believe manifests itself in what we create. Our inner vision, what we understand to be true and real, shapes our daily lives and the world around us. Whether the artists – from Spencer, Gill, Epstein, Sutherland, Moore, and Hepworth to Burra, Nolan, Aitchison, or Le Brun (the only one of these artists who is still living) – are Christian believers or not, biblical images are part of their imagination, a necessary part of the material they work with. Their work is living testimony to the continuing power of the Bible to confront and shape the human imagination, even in our secular age. It’s our joy to be able to invite you to consider their vision.

Roberta Green Ahmanson
7 November 2014
Corona del Mar, California

“OPUS ANGLICANUM”: ENGLISH WORK

The artist and poet David Jones, a close friend and associate of Eric Gill, left a fascinating essay-fragment at his death. It was published posthumously and is entitled “An Aspect of the Art of England.”¹ It is speculative – almost whimsical – but also rings true in its identification of a “distinguishing quality” of the art of what “the Greek geographers,” Strabo and Diodorus of Sicily called “the Pretanic Isles”:

[T]he Romans got their “Picti” from the same source – the Old Welsh *Priten*, the Old Irish *Cruithin*, the speckled, mottled, variegated, painted men.²

The distinguishing quality in question is a love of the “fretted, meandering, countered image,” and it is paradigmatically found in “*the one art which has taken its name from us*,” namely, “that kind of needlework called ‘Opus Anglicanum.’” Eclectic as ever, Jones traces this “flexible, delicate and chequered art” through the English Gothic tradition in architecture, and the poetry and watercolours of William Blake, and ends up in a garden:

It is said that the “cottage garden” is peculiar to this island, and that is not without interest – for the dappled complexity that makes the unity of those small gardens ... – especially after sunset, when each colour and each form is distinct and like an embroidery and as complex as an embroidery – is very much akin to the quality I mean ...

Jones articulates in words a tradition that a great many of the paintings in this exhibition proclaim visually: an English aesthetic sensibility whose clearest commitments are to small-scale and particular forms – a sensibility that has a native distrust of the conceptual ambition of high-handed theory and uncompromising abstraction. It is rare in England to find the highly regimented, geometrical gardens that are more typical of continental Europe and its imitators. The 20th-century English have preferred the tumbling, intertwining, organic shapes of, say, Sissinghurst in Kent, which represent not an imposition on wild nature, nor an attempt to suppress it, but rather a sort of “mutuality” with it: a sense of relationship and connection. Such a sampling of wild nature does not regard it as simply “other” or brutally “there.” On the contrary, it expresses the view that we can be at home with the non-human creation as well as the human one. And this aesthetic sensibility, I would suggest, has in many cases something like a theological correlate: an almost sacramental (though not narrowly ecclesiastical) belief that not just significant form but *divine life* is disclosed in the detailed particularities of the creatures that surround us. We find this divine life not by abstracting from them, but by attending to them all the more closely.

Of the works exhibited here, this attitude is perhaps most quintessentially expressed in the paintings and drawings of Stanley Spencer, in whom the religious and the domestic, the transcendent and the local, were never in tension. Even the sheets hung out to dry in a Leeds slum were a witness to heaven (“all blowing upward”), in a celebration of the knitted, densely-interrelated world as God-given and loved. The horizontal connections that bind the neighbors as their children play up and down the street are inseparably to be understood in the context of a vertical relation to the divine love which underwrites such local meaning: every doorstep is at the same time an “altar.”

This love of the particular is an English tradition with deep roots. The Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar – perhaps the greatest exponent of a theological aesthetics in the past 100 years – agreed with David Jones in tracing it back to medieval times. But he saw it flowing unbroken down the centuries to the present day. He saw in the arts of England a suspicion of “the value of universal concepts.” Balthasar identifies in this English aesthetic a particular celebration of “the irreducibility of the individual, be it material or personal”⁴ which has its summit in Shakespeare, “the greatest creator of unique, incomparable characters.”⁵ There is no place in this perspective for spurious ideas of “perfection in general.” There is instead “the absolute, hard reality in which alone the true glory of being shines forth.”⁶ There is a celebration of the “uniqueness ... of each image met with every day in nature or the world of men.”⁷ Balthasar relates it to what he calls the “hereditary empiricism” of the English imagination.⁸

The acknowledgement of Shakespeare in this context signals that there are literary as much as there are visual strands to this English tradition of domestic, particularist aesthetics. This is an important point, given that, as a nation that embraced the Reformation, the English redirected much of their imaginative energies from the visual into the textual for many centuries – making up for a loss of directly visual experience in their Christian art with an intensely-conceived world of literary images. But from the mid-18th-century (and especially the visionary work of Blake) onwards, this literary tradition reseeded an extraordinarily intense *revival* of visual religiosity. It is worth noting how many of the 20th-century artists represented in this collection have named Blake as a key influence on them.

So we might say that the painters and engravers and sculptors of the modern period represent a *reconnection* with pre-Reformation visual traditions – self-consciously rehabilitated through pilgrimages to the great works of medieval and early Renaissance Europe: the Giotto, the Piero, the Bellini – as well as a direct *continuation* of post-Reformation literary ones. Like Milton and Bunyan, they can imagine God “in ordinary,” walking in local habitations and familiar landscapes. But they are helped to do so by encountering with fresh eyes the simplicity and directness of a visual language that was denied to them for some centuries.

Without any undue prettification, and with a chastened pastoral sense that has a certain necessary sparseness (a modesty; and an acknowledgement of the “broken”), they nevertheless use this lost-and-found visual language (which is so deeply-touched by Christianity) to help us to wonder at our world. They assist our sometimes jaded eyes to appreciate “a world infinitely differentiated”⁹ in which, as T.S. Eliot put it, “nothing ... is a substitute for anything else,”¹⁰ and in which although great existential questions haunt us, things can nevertheless still make local sense. And if local sense can be made, then there is hope that the world we inhabit is not only “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Balthasar asserted that the English focus on concrete form – “the unique, the irreducible”¹¹ – has helped to preserve “the native rights of imagery in religious thought.”¹² Running (in its literary form) through Thomas Traherne and George Herbert to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Gerard Manley Hopkins, this tradition celebrates “an exact experiencing of the forms of the world ... not concepts (of ‘universal’, abstract truth), but images (of the unique, personal, divine-human truth).”¹³ It seeks to depict what Hopkins called the “arch-especial spirit” of things;¹⁴ emphasizing their distinctiveness, and not allow “unifying laws” to drown such distinctiveness. For this reason, it perhaps makes especially good sense to an English mind to say that the theologian should talk to the poet or the painter.

John Ruskin, too, has lent his magisterial voice to the advocacy of the sort of finely-textured particularism we have been exploring. Calling in his own way for constant attention to what Hopkins called “all things counter, original, spare, strange,”¹⁵ Ruskin summoned artists to respect the oddities, complexities and uniquenesses of things in order to render a truth that was as religious as it was aesthetic:

It is just as impossible to generalize granite and slate, as it is to generalize a man and a cow. An animal must be either one animal or another animal: it cannot be a general animal, or it is no animal; and so a rock must be either one rock or another rock; it cannot be a general rock, or it is no rock. If there were a creature in the foreground of a picture of which he could not decide whether it were a pony or a pig, the *Athenæum* critic would perhaps affirm it to be a generalization of pony and pig, and consequently a high example of “harmonious union and simple effect.” But I should call it simple bad drawing ...¹⁶

Ruskin’s appreciation of the infinite modulation of things – from the interlace of a landscape to the gnarls on a tree – looks back to the makers of medieval English Work and their love of detail and verisimilitude, as well as providing a key to why a great 20th-century painter like Stanley Spencer pays such attention to the patterns on a sweater. And the discerning eyes of the Ahmansons show a similar fineness of judgment, and an understanding of the tradition that makes sense of these works. This is not hectoring art. In many cases, it celebrates the mundane and the proximate. But it is no less passionate for that. Indeed, many of the works in this exhibition could be described as a lifting up of the mundane by passion, and a tempering of passion by the mundane, to the good of each.

An appreciation of this tradition helps us to understand why, for example, Christopher Le Brun’s landscapes are both mystically charged – humans and non-humans bound by a shared spiritual energy – as well as closely observed, making room as they do for the antics of the Prodigal Son’s family pet. It helps us to understand why Edward Burra, like many other artists in this collection, preferred to experiment with hybrid styles, combining figuration and abstraction, rather than being the purist proponents of a school or theory. (There is a characteristically English distrust of “-isms” to be found in the majority of the artists represented here.) And it helps us to understand why Spencer painted the environs of his parish as he did:

[W]ith the same prodigious delight in all the facts of nature for their own sake. He loves to paint nettles and grasses leaf by leaf, blade by blade [...]. He loves it all too much to leave anything out.

This keeps the works, in their various ways, unpredictable, quirky, but always humane. They are often “nests” rather than “cathedrals,” but this can in itself be a form of powerful witness to the humility of the incarnation of God as Christianity witnesses to it – and the still, small voice of a Craigie Aitchison *Crucifixion* or a Barbara Hepworth *Madonna and Child* can be a source of powerful resistance to the great totalitarianisms of the noisy and violent century that broke upon us in 1914. For it may be that the greatest and most enduring truths are not to be found in that century’s earthquakes, wind, and firestorms.

Professor Ben Quash

Professor of Christianity and the Arts and Director of the Centre for Arts and the Sacred, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King’s College London

¹ Jones, David, “An Aspect of the Art of England,” in *The Dying Gaul, and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 59-62.

² Jones, *Dying Gaul*, 59.

³ Jones, *Dying Gaul*, 60.

⁴ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *The Glory of the Lord* Vol.3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 355.

⁵ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 356.

⁶ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 357.

⁷ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 356-57.

⁸ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 354.

⁹ Pechey, Graham, “Pointed Remarks: Scholasticism and the Gothic in the English Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Christianity and Literature* 57:1 (2007), 25.

¹⁰ Eliot, T.S., *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 113.

¹¹ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 357.

¹² Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 354.

¹³ Balthasar, *Glory* 3, 391.

¹⁴ Hopkins, Gerard Manley, “Henry Purcell,” in *The Major Poems*, edited by Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1979), 78.

¹⁵ Hopkins, Gerard Manley, “Pied Beauty,” in *The Major Poems*, edited by Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1979), 68.

¹⁶ Ruskin, John, *Ruskin’s Modern Painters*, abridged and edited by A.J. Finberg (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1927), 142.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXHIBITION

The relationship between the arts and theology is always complex and multi-layered and never more so than when in relation to works about and inspired by the Bible. Although for a millennium biblical art was often informed by secular and cultural forces that moved outside of the control of the churches, the voice of the sacred was usually direct and clear. I think there seems to be a changed tenor and altered tone to the work as presented in this exhibition, and that sense is the focus for me of this exhibition. The sound and being of God is expressed in every image but the clarity of that sound is no longer represented by a single note that can be identified and understood by all. Instead, the voice of God is present differently in every image and sometimes differently to different people in the same image. I think this ultimately is the voice of the artist.

All the artists here address the Bible in their own way. The artist has always had as a tool of communication the ability to use the language of their specific medium or idiom to interpret ideas; what is especially pleasing within the context of this exhibition is how the celebration of difference can clearly be seen in the juxtapositioning of the images. Interpretation in this context has clearly been a vehicle for the artists to deliver their manifestos. We all understand paintings and sculptures because we recognize the semiotics surrounding these disciplines (that is, color, form, and gesture). When we see these elements layered within a composition based on a narrative, then we are all allowed the privilege of a third dimension being created – namely the artwork.

These artworks then are externalized to an audience and lie within a context. Without the biography of the artist, the audience has a chance to read the painting in this context. This reading (or viewing) has changed over the decades depending on the context in which the work is being seen – whether it is an ecclesiastical setting, a gallery/museum, a domestic setting, or somebody's home or office. Is the voice still present when the context is changed? We can see from the artists in the exhibition that the voice is ever present.

The painting that drew me to collaborate on this exhibition was Stanley Spencer's *Angels of the Apocalypse* (1949). I was indeed inspired not only by the painting itself but also by its context. In my own work, I have created a transcription of this painting to be shown in context with this exhibition. This led me to look very closely at Spencer's painting technique and to analyze the context in which it was made with particular reference to the text" as well as Spencer's personal motivation for creating the painting. I was also able to consider the way that an audience now participates in the viewing of this work within a 21st-Century context.

Stanley Spencer believed that the ordinary and the spiritual can become real because they can both be revealed through the work of the artist, and that this in turn is tantamount to "the resurrection happening every moment of one's life."¹ Spencer directly tackled the secular character of modern society. He feared the marginalization of the sacred and sought to reclaim God's presence in the world through what Tester identifies as an attempt to "see the unseen by sacramentalising the visible."² Spencer was clearly trying to understand here the concept of Heaven on earth, namely Cookham. Within *Angels of the Apocalypse* (1949) Spencer beautifully juxtaposed the metaphysical with the physical, creating a sense that angels are an everyday phenomenon within this setting. When we gaze upon this painting we are witness to a

setting of regeneration by celestial beings, namely the seven angels of the apocalypse. An audience from any farming community would recognize the performance of this regeneration every autumn in the sowing of new seeds for next year's harvest, and Spencer cleverly took this familiar setting and merely changed what is being regenerated – i.e. the entire world. The audience could then immediately identify with this and celebrate it. In this way, Spencer used a sense of the every day and what we are familiar with rather than a high drama of angels being destructive, flamboyant, and otherworldly. He wanted to give us an insight into his sense of Heaven on earth, a concept that we could experience every day but are often too busy to open our eyes to.

This is the voice of the artist interpreting text from the Bible in a purposely-learned manner. Spencer wrote

To look at the [religious] landscapes ... it seems too as if the emotion is inseparable from Cookham & to those who do not know how my religious emotions arose, a sort of wealthy, riverside drawing room atmosphere, snobbish & pretentious seems to prevail. But to me as a child a grand house is sometimes a sort of Heaven & as a child I used to peep through chinks and cracks in fences, etc & catch glimpses of those gardens of Eden of which there was a profusion at Cookham. From these glimpses I used to get, I assume that some sort of saint or very wonderful person lived there & so on. If I was not sure of that I invented & invited Biblical characters to take over.

Tester states: "To put this matter precisely, Stanley Spencer's vision is indebted to the persistence in secular modernity of the possibility of the imagination of an enchanted world."³

The images here prompt further questions about the relationship between Christianity and art. In a simpler age, where a shared language of art could communicate a single sacred voice, it is not surprising that the voice was loud and coherent. Although the symbols, themes, and narratives familiar in biblical art have changed and developed, the artist can still communicate them. In an age characterized by plurality, relativism, and a post-modern delight in difference, it would not be surprising if that voice was lost or lessened in some way beneath the clamor of mediums competing for our attention. Yet this exhibition suggests that the voice is recognizable for those who choose to look and see. If every image shown here represents an aspect of the sacred, a voice of the divine that can be identified as such, it seems that art retains its power to communicate. In *Making It Strange: Theology in Other(s)' Words*, Rowan Williams asks us to consider what happens, what changes when a religious narrative is translated into a secular framework. He suggests that the secular myth "veers away." He argues that the value of this parodic religious art is intriguing because through it we are given the opportunity to "understand the original narrative in a way that is not stale or merely pious."⁴ My painting is intended as a parody in Williams's sense. Overall, this is an homage and an interpretation and represents the voice of the artist in a secular society.

Angus Pryor
Head of the School of Art and Design
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¹ Adrian Glew, *Stanley Spencer Letters and Writings* (Tate Gallery Publishing: London, 2001), 120.

² K. Tester, "The Enchantment of Stanley Spencer" (New Blackfriars 91, no. 1034, 370-385, 2009), 372.

³ K. Tester, "The Enchantment of Stanley Spencer" (New Blackfriars 91, no. 1034, 370-385, 2009), 65.

⁴ Rowan Williams, "Making It Strange: Theology in Other(s)' Words," in *Sounding the Depths: Theology through the Arts*, ed. J. Begbie (London: SCM Press, 2002), 19-32.