

Book Review

**SACRED ART IN EAST AND WEST:
Its Principles and Methods
By Titus Burckhardt (Perennial Books, 35s.)**

Review by Gai Eaton

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 3, No. 1. (Winter, 1969) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

It is peculiarly difficult in an age which regards art and, indeed, beauty itself as a luxury (icing on the cake of "real life") to bring home to people the nature of sacred art and the role it has played in societies less profane than our own. Among the truths considered self-evident is the ready assumption that men's essential needs are, almost by definition, physical, men being "essentially" no different to battery hens and the like; all else is, in the last resort, "inessential" and, in an increasingly overcrowded world, there is less and less room for inessentials.

Mr. Burckhardt's book, the most outstanding study of sacred art that has appeared since the death of Ananda Coomaraswamy, offers a powerful corrective to the errors and illusions upon which this attitude is based. In spite of the author's considerable erudition, this is not an academic work, but a study of what real art has been in the past and of what it still is in those few regions of the world that have not yet been completely overrun by modernism.

Sacred art, in these terms, is not merely art which happens to have as its theme a sacred subject, but art inherently sacred (whatever its theme may be) both in its nature and in the manner of its execution, a making on earth of things that are rooted in Heaven, the shadowing forth here of things that truly reside there and the creation, so far as the human environment is concerned, of something which carries with it the perfume of a Paradise seemingly lost and almost forgotten, yet still slumbering within us. Sacred art is an art which makes us remember what we are. It is as though the smoke from a great fire had gradually blackened everything around us (except for virgin nature), and these works alone remain clean and clear, fresh with the freshness of the first creation.

It is significant that Mr. Burckhardt's book opens with a chapter on the "Genesis of the Hindu Temple", for temple building consists in placing one solid stone upon another, stones heavy to carry, scarring the hands; and this is as far as possible from those airy fantasies and that unrealistic idealism which pass for "spiritual" in our time. Just because religion, relegated to a little private corner of life, has been emasculated and etiolated, we need most desperately to see it related once more to the concrete. The sacred art with which this book deals is at once concrete and precise. It is an art which, by its very nature, offers to physical sight and touch that which is real with a harder, more compelling reality than the everyday world with which we are familiar; and it is, at the same time, supremely *useful*. "One of the fundamental conditions of happiness", says Mr.

Burckhardt, "is to know that every-thing that one does has a meaning in eternity; but who in these days can still conceive of a civilization within which all vital manifestations would be developed 'in the likeness of Heaven'? In a theocentric society the humblest activity participates in this heavenly benediction".

This book deals with the sacred art of five great traditions: Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism; and, in the context of the first of these, the author has chosen to deal primarily with temple construction since "among settled peoples the sacred art *par excellence* is the building of a sanctuary in which the Divine Spirit, invisibly present in the Universe, will 'dwell' in a direct and, as it were, personal sense". Here it is a question of establishing in one place a Centre which, although everywhere present, is not apprehended so far as human beings are concerned until it is localized—one might almost say, pinned down. And since that which is central in relation to all that is extended in the Universe is itself single and indivisible, each such localization is unique, not merely "a centre" but "the Centre". Mr. Burckhardt shows (with the aid of a number of useful diagrams) how the directions of space are coordinated in the plan of the temple, so that the immeasurable is given measurable, rectangular form, a small and entirely sacred cosmos created in the image of the great one, so that men who are too easily lost in the boundless space outside find here a sanctuary within which the journey to their own divine centre is a journey of manageable proportions; and he shows also that the actual construction of the temple (in common with the true "making" of any sacred work) has an "alchemical" significance "in so far as it is the support of an inward realization in the artist himself".

The transition from Hindu to Christian art involves less of a journey than many readers might expect, for traditional art, however varied its manifestations and how-ever different its flavour as between one sacred world and another, always grows from a root that is indivisible, and it is always a single truth that is being expressed in its inexhaustible richness. For the medieval craftsman in Europe, as for his Hindu counterpart, the great work upon which he was engaged involved the formation of a cosmos out of chaos. For him there was analogy between the Church or Cathedral and the body of Christ, while at the same time the cosmos itself was the "body" of the revealed Divinity. And, while outwardly at work with hammer and chisel, he was simultaneously at work on his own soul, changing it "from a crude stone, irregular and opaque, into a precious stone penetrated by the Divine Light".

In a chapter entitled "I Am The Door" the author gives particular consideration to the iconography of the Romanesque church portal, which itself recapitulates the nature of the sanctuary as a whole, for "a sanctuary is like a door opening on the beyond, on the Kingdom of God"; and he demonstrates how the theme of Christian charity is inherent in the iconography: "Charity, then, is the recognition of the untreated Word in creatures; for creatures do not show their real nature except in so far as they are poor and needy, that is to say, cleansed of pretensions and of all powers attributed to themselves. He who recognizes the presence of God in his neighbor, realizes it in himself; thus it is that spiritual virtue leads towards union with the Christ, Who is the Way and the Divine Door".

In his chapter on Islamic art Mr. Burckhardt stresses that the Unity upon which Islam is centered can only be expressed outwardly in abstract terms, but he warns against any

attempt to equate this kind of abstraction, which "manifests as directly as possible Unity in multiplicity", and the private "abstractions" of modern European art which express in uneasy fashion the obscure impulses that come from the unconscious. In Islamic art all is clarity and light, the artist releasing and making apparent the beauty that inheres in all things that come from God (in accordance with the saying of the Prophet that "God is beautiful and He loves beauty"), conferring on stone or stucco the quality of precious jewels.

After brief sections on "The Image of the Buddha" and on "Landscape in Far Eastern Art", the author considers in a final chapter the decadence and renewal of Christian art. Particularly interesting—and particularly important as a corrective to the ideas so mercilessly pumped into school-children in the West—is his comparison of the "flowering of genius" at the time of the Renaissance to what happens, on the individual level, when a man abandons a spiritual discipline and gives himself free rein: "Psychic tendencies that have been kept in the background suddenly come to the fore, accompanied by a glittering riot of new sensations having all the attractiveness of possibilities not yet fully explored; but they lose their fascination as soon as the initial pressure on the soul is relaxed". Yet there is an urge to maintain the momentum, and this can only be maintained by descending to ever lower levels of experiment and experience, just as water is kept moving only if it is channeled downwards. The first exuberance exhausted, man ends by seeking to renew that "glittering riot" in regions where only ugliness and pain can provide a comparable intensity of sensation. In art as in life, once the centre is lost, the teeming, uncoordinated flood of possibilities—expressed in new styles, new fashions, which succeed each other ever more swiftly—leads directly to exhaustion and to chaos.

A renewal of Christian art, says Mr. Burckhardt, is not conceivable without an awakening of the contemplative spirit at the heart of Christianity; and indeed, if it is not to be carried away in the chaos of the modern world, the Church must retire within itself. The seductions of that fatally descending movement which has the profane world in its grip can be resisted only by a Church which returns to its origins, not in time but beyond time. In the absence of this foundation, every attempt to restore the sacred art of Christendom must fail.

But the richness of this book cannot be summarized, for it springs from the essential unity of the author's outlook, a unity which transcends and dominates the breadth and variety of his themes. Behind all sacred art (and also within it) lies the Sacred itself, single and indivisible in the midst of its manifestations. And what we learn from this study, if we are prepared to learn, has a bearing not only upon the human environment in which we live, but also upon the nature of that inner reality by which we live.