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Polemic

Controversial Moderns

Tensions between tradition and innovation, continuity and change are themes that were recently explored in a seminar at the Courtauld Institute (and in conjunction with King's College London) through papers on two high-profile commissions in the Diocese of Chichester. Hana Leaper and Naomi Billingsley here summarise their case studies on controversial moderns.



Vanessa Bell *Sketch for the Annunciation*, 1941

The Berwick Church murals at St Michael & All Angels, 1941–4

Amid the dislocation of the Second World War, the question of the role of contemporary art in the Christian church in modern society became increasingly contested. In 1932, at the opening of the Vatican Pinacoteca, Pope Pius XI had railed against 'certain other so-called sacred works of art, which do not seem to evoke and present the sacred other than to disfigure it to the extent of caricature, and often going as far as true and actual profanation'¹. Yet artists throughout Italy and France continued to express religious themes in contemporary vernaculars, and by 1947, Pope Pius XII declared modern art

a valid servant of the church, if restrained by certain conditions:

Modern art should be given free scope in the due and reverent service of the church and the sacred rites, provided that they preserve a correct balance between styles tending neither to extreme realism nor to excessive 'symbolism,' and that the needs of the Christian community are taken into consideration [178]²

A more enthusiastic supporter of modern art was George Bell, Bishop of Chichester between 1929–58, who put into practice his belief that engaging with the makers of contemporary culture was key to the revitalisation of the

church and the promotion of humanist values.³ He became the patron of a number of schemes, commissioning contemporary artists such as the German emigré Hans Feibusch to decorate churches, and in 1940 commissioned the Charleston artists to design a mural project for the ancient church of St Michael & All Angels, Berwick.

One of the most extraordinary – and inherently controversial – things about this complex and astonishing project, executed between 1941 and 1944 by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Quentin Bell, is their positioning of a cast of local people and sights within the works. Although the depiction of contemporary individuals in church mural painting was common in

medieval art, there are fewer examples of this in recent art, with the notable exception of Stanley Spencer's Sandham Memorial Chapel. Taking on a mural commission under church patronage may seem an incongruous undertaking for atheist artists, but Bell and Grant had requested such opportunities by using an advertisement business card in 1922 inviting commissions for 'decorations, domestic, ecclesiastical, theatrical'.⁴

Some parishioners of Berwick objected strongly to the project and entered an Act of Petition so that the case had to be tried before a Consistory Court. The protestors' objections were not merely aesthetic: they objected to both the decorations, and the decorators. Mrs Sandilands of the jam-making club didn't approve of the work being carried out during wartime, and wrote to Bishop Bell: 'Mr Grant must be a strong and very clever man to be able to do this strenuous job of mural painting; let him turn his talents in other directions for the time being to help his country as so many others are doing.'⁵ In fact, although the artists were pacifists and had been conscientious objectors during the First World War, Grant was too old for service, and Quentin Bell was excused from military service on health grounds as a result of tuberculosis and did farm work instead. Grant had briefly been employed as an official war artist in 1940 and recorded naval subjects at Plymouth. At Berwick his mural for the wall over the chancel arch presented *Christ in Glory* with, on one side, three kneeling servicemen in uniform, all based on local men: Mr Weller (sailor), Mr Huphrey (airman), and Douglas Hemming, a soldier and 'son of the local station master', who was to die in service at Caen in 1944, aged 26.⁶

The decorations show a great affection and respect for the community and environment. Vanessa Bell's *Nativity* and *Annunciation* scenes on either side of the nave further illustrate T S Eliot's idea of the local parish's attachment 'to the soil' by using a cast of local people.⁷ Bell details regional produce, such as carrots, cabbages and turnips, presented in a Sussex trug – baskets crafted with coppiced sweet chestnut from nearby woodlands

The children in *Nativity* worshipping at the crib include John Higgins the son of the Charleston gardener and housekeeper, in the uniform of the local village school. Sketches found in the Angelica Garnett Gift, now housed

at Charleston, suggest that the cattle, lamb and donkey are likely to have been drawn from the farm animals on surrounding land. The holy family – the Virgin Mary modelled on Bell's daughter Angelica Garnett, and the Christ child – are surrounded by local shepherds carrying Pyecombe crooks, a variety made in the village of Pyecombe, 15 miles from Charleston. These murals commemorate the sacred in the 'local and particular', both ancient and modern.⁸

Supported by Sir Kenneth Clark, TA Fennimore, and Bertram Nicholls the case in favour of the murals was won, and the Berwick murals, in concert with ecclesiastical works like Hans Feibusch's murals rendered the stories, emotions and essential humanity of these subjects comprehensible to a modern, if critical, audience.

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1 Pope Pius XI, 'We Have Little', 27 October 1932, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/it/speeches/documents/hf_pxi_spe_19321027_abbiamo-poco.html

quoted in translation from Ludovica Sebergondi, 'Reconciliation with the Sacred: Dialogues between Ancient and Modern Art', in *Divine Beauty: From Van Gogh to Chagall and Fontana*, exhibition catalogue ed. Lucia Mannini, Anna Mazzanti, Ludovica Sebergondi and Carlo Sisi, exhibitor Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 24 Sep 2015–24 Jan 2016 (Marsilio: Italy, 2016)

2 Pope Pius XII, 'Mediator Dei', verse 195, 20th November 1947, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei.html

3 The clergyman was no relation to Vanessa Bell or her wider family.

4 Reproduced in Frances Spalding, *Virginia Woolf: Art, Life and Vision* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2014), p.116.

5 Richard Shone, *Berwick Church Paintings*, Revised Edition p. 6.

6 Reverend Peter Blee, <http://www.berwickchurch.org.uk/christ%20in%20glory.html>. See also Blee's book *The Bloomsbury Group in Berwick Church*, 2016.

7 T S Eliot, *Idea*, p. 31.

8 Roger Fry used this phrase in his sustained formal analysis of church mural painting in 'Giotto', p.97.

The Piper Tapestry Chichester Cathedral, 1966

If at Berwick it was the artists that caused upset, the murals themselves being recognisably traditional in style and subject-matter, the Piper Tapestry at Chichester raised objections primarily on aesthetic grounds (although theological and financial protestations were also made). The commissioning of John Piper to design a reredos for Chichester Cathedral was one of several important projects initiated by Walter Hussey as Dean (1955–77). The brief: to focus attention on the High Altar and Sanctuary by introducing colour that would bring warmth to the space, and call to the visitor from the West end. The result – a vibrant seven-panel tapestry on the theme of the Trinity – certainly met that aim. Hussey was delighted; not all agreed.

Hussey's view was that the church had always commissioned contemporary work to sit alongside the ancient, and so it should be for the new reredos. He approached Piper in 1963 with a view to a painting; Piper and Robert Potter, the Cathedral architect, explored a number of ideas before deciding upon tapestry.¹ Piper's initial idea was for a figure scheme: one in each of the sanctuary screen's seven niches, as in his windows for Oundle School (1955–56). This plan was replaced with a scheme of the Trinity (the dedication of the Cathedral), Evangelists and four elements; a design was in place by late 1964. The Archdeacon of Chichester, Lancelot Mason then raised an objection: at this stage, the central section depicted the flame, the Tau cross and the triangle. Thus, there was a symbol for the Holy Spirit, for Christ, and for the Trinity, but not one for the Father – it seems Piper had intended the triangle to represent the Father. Piper was unnerved at Mason's objection, 'at this 11th hour', wishing that it had been raised earlier. Piper now found it difficult to incorporate another symbol, leaving him feeling that he needed to rethink the whole central section, thus delaying proceedings.² He struggled to find a solution, but eventually decided to 'have a white light up on the left', completing the group of symbols in the final design.³

Piper was facing the centuries-old problem of representing the complex idea of the Trinity. His solution drew on traditional symbolism for each of the Persons, but employing these in a



composition to represent the Trinity was unusual, and arguably, does not do justice to the togetherness of the three identities – the triangle is a nod to the unity, but is in itself a debatably inadequate symbol for interrelationship. Nevertheless, the design was approved and Piper prepared full-sized cartoons for the seven panels.

The panels were produced by Pinton Frères of Felletin, near Aubusson, France, who quoted 39,000 Francs – about £3,500.⁴ There were objections about the cost because the Cathedral was also fundraising for major renovations. Hussey defended the project on the grounds that the cost was ‘small compared with the sum that is needed for repairs’ and that the public were more likely to support a Cathedral that was alive and cared for.⁵

Having caused controversy as parish priest in Northampton with his brave commissions from Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore, and in previous work at Chichester (including another Sutherland, which so riled one viewer that she attacked it with a biro), Hussey was prepared for a mixed reaction. His dedication address urged viewers to be open-minded:

If we are wise we shall look at them and study them a number of times, in different lights, before we express an opinion ... Then I believe we shall recognise them as a magnificent & contemporary, and therefore traditional, adornment of this wonderful House of God.⁶

Perhaps the most famous reaction is Cheslyn Jones, Canon Chancellor, donning dark glasses to the dedication service to express his opinion about the tapestry's vibrancy. Others wrote to Hussey to express their feelings. G.H. Eggers described his party's ‘amazement’ to see, upon entering the Cathedral, ‘in place of the dignified Altar and Screen ... a garish backcloth’. They felt unable to take Communion and that any message intended in the design was lost. Finally, he hoped that the Cathedral would soon ‘revert once again to its [sic] quiet dignity and peace’ which he believed would ‘attract more people to God than the present innovation.’⁷ John Parker also felt that the colour was ‘glaring & non-neighbourly’ with its surroundings, and prophesied that the next generation would remove the piece.⁸

By contrast, Godfrey Thomas wrote that he found the tapestry ‘an aid to



John Piper *Tapestry*, 1966

worship and contemplation, both in its outstanding presence and also by its dispensation with picture images to represent living abstraction.’ He hoped that dissenting opinion would not result in defacement or removal.⁹ Ethel Bunyer had visited somewhat apprehensively, but was impressed to see:

... something that was glowing and alive & symbolic of what the Church must and should be in the present age. It took away the feeling that Christianity is old and crumbling like the Cathedral. Here was something to bring hope & a challenge to all of us ...¹⁰

Lloyd Morrell, Bishop of Lewes, similarly felt that the piece had made the Cathedral ‘come alive’ and that the ‘wonderful focus of colour and design seems to take its place so naturally in a building which has absorbed something from every age’. He added that ‘the whole Diocese’ should be ‘grateful ... for [Hussey's] vision and enterprise’.¹¹

Fifty years on, in spite of prophesies that it would be removed, the tapestry is a familiar feature in the Cathedral, and the slice of its red and yellow glimpsed as the visitor enters at the West end continues to surprise and excite. In 2016, Pallant House Gallery held an exhibition on Piper's textile work to mark the half-century (reviewed in A&C 86) – a marker of the regard in which the piece is held. Hussey's recommendation that the tapestry merits time was borne out in some of my work as Bishop Otter Scholar, with some participants in dis-

cussion groups that I held about the art in the Cathedral reporting a deepened appreciation for the tapestry. I met more admirers than objectors (granted, my work made it more likely for me to encounter sympathetic viewers) but of course, views about the piece remain mixed. It continues to challenge those who worship in and visit the Cathedral – here's to another 50 years of service!

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1 ‘Weaving a Modern Work of Art’, *Weekend Telegraph*, Number 104, September 23 1966, 34-37: 35/37. Hussey Ms. 367, West Sussex Record Office. The Hussey papers are quoted here by courtesy of the Very Revd. the Dean of Chichester and with acknowledgements to the West Sussex Record Office and the County Archivist.

2 Piper to Hussey, 2 January 1965. Ms. 365.
3 Piper to Hussey, 19 February 1965. Ms. 365.
4 Pinton Frères to John Piper, 23 September 1964. Ms. 365.

5 Typescript of Walter Hussey's address at the dedication of the Piper Tapestry at Chichester Cathedral, 20 September 1966. Ms. 367.
6 Ibid.

7 G.H. Eggers to Walter Hussey, 4 January 1967. Ms. 366.
8 John Parker to Walter Hussey, 14 November 1966. Ms. 366.
9 Godfrey Thomas to Walter Hussey, 28 September 1966. Ms. 366.

10 Ethel A Bunyer to Walter Hussey, 23.9.66. Mss. 366.
11 Bishop of Lewes to Walter Hussey, 20 October 1966. Ms. 366.

