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A NOTE ON THE ART OF ERNST FUCHS

ERNST FUCHS is a painter of worlds within worlds. He himself tells us so in the brave attempt he makes below to explicate his paintings. His paintings themselves tell us as much again. They do so particularly in the fresh way he uses generally accepted religious themes, symbols, signs. He is never content to allow a familiar scene to carry its own weight. He almost always adds a measure of interiority that takes us far from the surface events of, say, the Resurrection or the Assumption, or the obvious iconography that we associate with the Archangel Michael or the crucified Christ. Michael's sword bursts into flame; his shield and his breastplate are heavily worked with precious metals and gems. But the great jewelry of the painting is to be found in the angel's fiery hair and rapt, recollected face; these are surely his greatest weapons in repelling the devils who conduct their affairs at the bottom of the painting. In the same way, Fuchs has surrounded Christ on the cross with a strange unearthly vegetation, which in the tradition of medieval symbols can be interpreted as signifying good or evil.

Fuchs's colors are an essential part of his translation of inner images into outer textures. He does extraordinary things with the red and blue palette, making gradations in tone sometimes so subtle that one must look three or four times to discover all the details of exteriority and interiority that he has locked within the colors. Such attention is not ever wasted here. For Ernst Fuchs's paintings offer a tumultuous show of intuitive skill and bravura style that makes comparison with his own favorite painters of the Northern Renaissance—Hieronymus Bosch, the younger Pieter Brueghel, Matthias Grünewald—really much more fitting than the modern Surrealists with whom, at first anyway, one may be tempted to compare him.

BARRY ULANOV

ERNST FUCHS / ATTEMPTED COMMENTARY ON
MY PAINTING

FOR me, the world of images is one of those parables whose language, enigmatic though it often is and hard to decipher, seeks to express the inexplicable mystery of the creation and of the Creator who made the whole universe a likeness of His everlasting glory. Through inward perceptions, the inner eye of almost all men sees thoughts and ideas which have an image-like and parabolic character. This world of inner images, images that often have little to do with the impressions the physical eye receives from its environment, is at the same time the revealing domain of symbols and the domain in which spirits and angels approach men. It is a realm so full of color and music, so rich, that a human mind just entering it feels almost menaced by its undreamed-of abundance.

This is the spiritual realm from which I create. The men of antiquity called the state of looking into this inner province and of being spoken to from there *inspiratio*. It was an enthusiasm that made itself known in every possible form to the artist. Today we are able to see an unbroken line of ancestors of those artists who express the world of inner images, artists who, I am tempted to say, share their prophetic and esoteric knowledge with each other like the members of a mystical tribe. Out of the prophetic books arise the founding fathers of this art. Through Moses, God chose Bezalel, builder of the ark of the covenant, the cherubim, the propitiatory, the lamp stand, and all the other appurtenances (see Ex 31:1-11), commanding him to fashion them like their heavenly prototypes and thus to make visible to all the people what up to then only the elect were allowed to behold.

Like Bezalel, all the artists of an earlier age served only the heavenly mysteries; things profane, like furniture and fabrics, were embellished by the people themselves. Up to the time of the Reformation, at least in the West, the vocation of the artist was a central one. Anonymously for the most part, he served the revealed mysteries, as one commissioned by the Church. In later days, we find him leading an even more hidden life; though without that commission, he still leaned toward revelation, creating those pictures that are the parables of the spiritual world. In the nineteenth century, Redon and

Bresdin handed down to us the inheritance they had been given by Blake and Fuseli—to mention only a few—and which they in turn, by way of the Mannerists, had received from Bosch, Brueghel, Manzu, and Grünewald.

In the twentieth century, almost all art breathes apocalyptic air. Suddenly there exist artists, in frightening numbers, who seek to make visible what is ordinarily invisible. The griefs of our day are the threatening elixir of life that intoxicates almost all of them. While living in the nitrogen of world catastrophes they see the images of present, past, and future pains and promises, in an opulence that mocks every attempt to rationalize it.

Even in my early youth I tried to paint "fine" pictures. Almost always I clung to inner images, only rarely did I draw from nature. When I saw the paintings of Hans Baldung and Grünewald for the first time, and later when I saw Bosch, I thought that finally I was receiving the legacy of my fathers; I felt related to them as a matter of course and looked upon them as if they were my fathers by blood. Without great difficulty I acquired the magical, "fine" style of expression and the use of those almost alchemistic materials which they employed in their work. On the whole this craft seems to have an imprint of worship that surely must come from the art of the icon. Later I discovered similar ideas in some of my own contemporaries. Since then I have no longer thought of myself as a "lone wolf." Images burst on me. Often I am unable to explain them; at times they are as oddly strange to me as they are to the viewer. There are other times when images invade my mind, images that I would not like to paint because I feel that one should not paint them. Other painters, it seems to me, have seen and felt similar or the same things and have kept them to themselves.

By this I mean to say that there are realms of inspiration that defy representation because of a special quality, a sacredness that commands fear and arouses love.

(This article originally appeared as "Versuch eines Kommentars zu meiner Malerei" in *Die Kunst und das schöne Heim*, LVI, 8, May 1958, pp. 288-291.)



ERNST FUCHS: Moses Before the Burning Bush

The Lord appears to Moses in a fire flaming out of a bush, a bush burning but not burnt (see Ex 3:2). In the midst of the bush—and of the Lord—Moses sees the Menorah, the great seven-branched candlestick ordained by the Lord for His tabernacle (see Ex 25:31-37). The Menorah is itself a type of tree, whose branches burn endlessly to proclaim the greatness of Yahweh and are not consumed, neither in the wilderness through which Moses leads his people nor in the wilderness in which Christ fasts. Both deserts are recalled by the painter's landscape. But this picture is also a kingly one: Moses, monarch of his people, stands transfixed before his Lord. Over all is set the face of the King of Kings. Mount Horeb, where Moses saw the vision of the bush, is a jewel in the crown of Christ; His tears and sweat of blood are precious stones coursing down His face in shining splendor.



ERNST FUCHS: Christ Crowned With Thorns

This face of Christ is a parable of patience. Fuchs's interpretation of the Suffering Servant's countenance is as that of a Hasidic Jew, complete to every detail of his hair. And the imitation of Christ enjoined here is not only a contemplation *of* Him, but *with* Him—a rare spiritual experience.



ERNST FUCHS: The Risen Christ

A gallery of types and figures out of centuries of religious images crowds round the Lord, whose shroud of death has turned into a tight tourniquet of life binding up His wounds and covering His nakedness. Among the many rich details are the skeletons of war and famine and plague (bottom left), two ornate angels (on either side of the tomb), a Bosch-like cavalcade of evil (center left), symbols of the two Testaments, the cross and the star of David (left and right on the tomb), and the crown of thorns blossoming with roses in celebration of the Resurrection. The whole has a state-liness and a majesty and a meditative quality reminiscent of the great Flemish painters of Christ.



ERNST FUCHS: The Assumption of Mary

An ecstatic Mary dances before the Lord like David before the tabernacle. This cartoon for a mural bursts with joy. It cannot contain within the boundaries of the picture all the motions of happiness and streaks of light that surround Mary as she rejoins her Son crucified and risen. Christ's garment and crown resemble those of the High Priest of Israel, His breastplate is the "Shield of David," His arms are outstretched as on the cross, and from His wounded hands shoot forth rays of glory.