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## An American View of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

The art of illustration in America deserves more appreciation than it has received in the past thirty or forty years. Critical opinion has given it such a low place among the visual arts that one is not prepared for the artistic quality of a work like the oil painting of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by Dean Cornwell, in the Museum of Art and Archaeology. The picture, shown above, was painted to illustrate first a magazine article and then a book.<sup>1</sup>

Illustration has a distinguished tradition in American art. *Harper's Weekly*, for which a group of noted artists worked, including Winslow Homer, stands at the beginning of that tradition in the mid-nineteenth century. Gradually, around 1900, the new techniques of photoengraving replaced the earlier woodcuts, ushering in a golden age of illustration. Though that age ended with the common use of the camera in recent decades, the tradition survives. Critical



*Photograph of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, taken during the 1920s. Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.*

opinion is beginning to change, but as recently as 1966, when a major survey of the subject appeared,<sup>2</sup> the opening chapter was entitled, "Is Illustration Art?"

Our low opinion of illustration is due to the deadly seriousness with which we have taken abstract art — so pure and profound — in the twentieth century. "Mere illustration" is concerned with storytelling and must have recognizable subject matter. It is "literary," according to modern criticism. Even worse, it is almost always done under commission, and is therefore commercial and impure. Perhaps by now we have enough perspective on the abstract movement to join that small group — mostly illustrators themselves — who understood all along that illustration could be taken seriously as an art form. Recent years have seen a growing number of studies of American illustrators.

The most lavish is a volume on Norman Rockwell, but there are also important studies and exhibition catalogues of such key figures as Howard Pyle, Edwin Austin Abbey and N. C. Wyeth. Perhaps a taste for "camp" has contributed to our changed evaluation of illustration; more probably a new respect for realism in current American painting has affected it; and certainly the works of the illustrators merit re-discovery by virtue of their artistic quality.

Many of the illustrators were also muralists, and the two traditions parallel each other closely in this country. The mural tradition began with the project to decorate the interior of the United States Capitol in the 1850s. That first commission went to an Italian artist, Constantino Brumidi, but in the 1870s William Morris Hunt and John LaFarge, American artists, were commissioned to do murals in public buildings.

They, together with Abbey, stand at the beginning of the mural tradition, which at first dealt mainly with allegorical subjects painted in a baroque style. It was the new classical architecture of the Beaux-Arts system that called for these mural programs as well as for extensive amounts of sculpture, and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1894 provided a strong stimulus for all these arts.

Dean Cornwell was among the best of the illustrators and muralists working in the twentieth century. In the 1920s and '30s he was a celebrity, known to the general public as well as to the artistic community. The main tradition in illustration was that established by Howard Pyle, and Cornwell was the leading exponent of the Pyle tradition for four decades. Yet, since his death in 1960, he has been all but forgotten and there has been only passing reference to him in any publication. The time has come to rediscover him.<sup>3</sup>

CORNWELL WAS BORN in 1892 in Louisville, where he grew up and received his first training in art. In 1911, as a young artist, he moved to Chicago. He worked for commercial art studios and as an illustrator with the *Chicago Tribune*, and studied briefly at the Chicago Art Institute. With a major commission from *The Red Book Magazine* he moved to New York in 1915, and

upon arriving, he enrolled at the Art Students League. That summer he studied with Harvey Dunn and Charles Chapman in the special course they taught in Leonia, New Jersey. This course was important for the history of illustration. Though he traveled considerably, New York remained Cornwell's home for the rest of his life.

Right from the beginning Cornwell was busy and successful, receiving prizes and popular recognition for his illustrations. His career was greatly advanced when he won the competition for the principal murals in the Los Angeles Public Library in 1927. These murals were developed in London, in the studio of the great English muralist Frank Brangwyn. The Los Angeles project, which brought Cornwell a great deal of notice, both good and bad, was completed in 1932.

The 1930s, '40s and '50s continued to bring Cornwell commissions, awards, prizes and exhibitions. He regularly did illustrations for stories in *The Red Book Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Hearst's International*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The American Magazine* and other magazines, as well as a large number of books, most for Cosmopolitan Book Corporation. Perhaps his best known book is a deluxe edition of *The Robe*, commissioned by RKO Pictures. Toward the end of his career his interest lay mainly in mural work, and he received commissions in cities all across this country and in Europe.

Cornwell fell heir to the Pyle tradition through his studies with Harvey Dunn, who had been one of Pyle's students at Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Cornwell himself said that through Dunn he "became a grand pupil" of Pyle. The tradition established by Pyle and Abbey was influenced primarily by the Pre-

Raphaelite movement. It was necessarily based on realism, with a high value placed on authenticity of detail and setting, and on appropriateness of characterization. The requirements for accuracy of the illustrated newspapers of the nineteenth century also provided a model for the simple realism and factual reportage of the illustrators. The realism of the Pyle tradition also reflects the coloristic, compositional and decorative influences of late nineteenth-century painting, particularly Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and the Art Nouveau, but without abandoning the emphasis on authenticity. Cornwell's stay in Frank Brangwyn's studio while working on the Los Angeles murals left its mark on his mural style, in the use of flatter forms and a shallower pictorial space, in a

mosaic surface, in a changed palette, and for a time in the use of heavy outlining. Toward the end of his career Cornwell's style became crisper, with sharp edges, and a more photographic realism.

Cornwell stressed the importance of research for the illustrator.<sup>4</sup> He always went to the site of the story, he said, and "I take along a camera, sketch book, and water colors. I may merely tint my pencil notes after I return to the hotel or camp. But I like to use color right away so I don't forget things." Authenticity came with attention to the characteristic detail, and the illustrator needed a vast knowledge of such detail based on research and close observation during extensive travel. Cornwell even kept in his studio a large collection of pots and pans,



*Cornwell sketching outside the walls of Jerusalem, from an article written by him in Design for January 1950.*





*Cornwell in his studio, from an article by him in Design for January 1950.*

ing trip to the Middle East." The trip was made in 1925, and it was for the second series that Cornwell painted the picture now in Missouri. The series appeared under the title "The City of the Great King and other places in the Holy Land," and was published in color in *Good Housekeeping* in several issues during 1926. In the same year the articles were published separately as a book with the same title by Cosmopolitan Book Corporation.

Normally an illustrator was given a story from which he worked. In this case, however, the pictures came first and the text was written to go with them. For this series the distinguished professor of English literature at Yale,

William Lyon Phelps, provided romantic and inspirational histories and descriptions of the sites that Cornwell painted. The Missouri picture, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, is the last in the series. It is signed with the artist's initials and dated "26." The painting has a rich surface as well as a colorful one. The paint is applied thickly over a foundation of areas of local color. Figures are rendered in broad, impressionistic strokes with little attention to fine detail. The picture, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, is a good example of Cornwell's best period.

Phelps tells us that this painting shows the view from Cornwell's rooms in Jerusalem. We



*Two panels from the historical and allegorical murals for the Los Angeles City Public Library: left, "Earth, Digging for Gold"; above, "Air, Productivity."*



see the south front of the church, with its double, arched entrances, strongly framed in our painting by the surrounding buildings, looking much the same today as it did in 1926, as indeed it did in the twelfth century, when this part of the original Early Christian building took on its present form. Since the 1930s the carved Romanesque lintels over the two doors which appear both in the painting and the photograph have been on display in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, where they were moved to preserve them from weathering.<sup>7</sup> Only under extreme lighting conditions would the church appear so vibrantly red as it does in the strong morning light in the painting. The procession and groups of figures, even the gambling priests, conform to what Cornwell saw, according to Phelps, and are historically appropriate as well, he argued. In Phelps's words, "No one can gaze on this picture without having his thoughts turn back to that spring morning twenty centuries ago, when the soldiers, and the priests, and the weeping women, and the curious mob followed the Divine Sufferer from the city walls to the tiny mound of Calvary."

The popular literary magazines have disappeared, replaced presumably by television. It seems unlikely that one would find at Yale today a professor of English literature with the simple heart of William Lyon Phelps. Conditions are no longer right for a Dean Cornwell to do so grand a *mise en scène* as *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre*. Today, his theatrical art at its best belongs more narrowly to the theater again, on film and video tape.

OSMUND OVERBY  
*University of Missouri-Columbia*

<sup>1</sup> Acc. No. 75.197. 86.5 cm. x 1.225 m. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Schriever, who had acquired it from the artist's widow, Mildred Kirkham Cornwell. This article is based on studies of Cornwell done in 1976 and 1977 under the author's direction by graduate students in the Department of Art History and Archaeology: Lora Holtz, Keith W. Klein, Betty C. Pate and Phyllis Strawn.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Reed, ed., *The Illustrator in America, 1900-1960s* (New York 1966).

<sup>3</sup> A major book on Cornwell will appear in the fall of 1978, *Dean Cornwell, Dean of Illustrators*, by Patricia Janis Broder. Mrs. Broder has kindly sent us a copy of her manuscript which has been of great help in preparing this article. The Museum of Art and Archaeology is preparing a Cornwell exhibition to mark the publication of Mrs. Broder's book. During his lifetime Cornwell's work was regularly discussed in the art magazines, but since his death there has been little more than occasional passing reference to him in any publication. Mrs. Broder's book will provide the first review of Cornwell's career, a chronology of his life, a list of works and bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Cornwell, "Book Illustration," *Design* 51 (January 1950) 16-17. Cornwell published a second article, "The Art of Mural Painting," *Design* 51 (February 1950) 8-9, 22. Mrs. Broder has collected a number of unpublished works by Cornwell which amplify his ideas about art as expressed in these two articles.

<sup>5</sup> "Cornwell Lectures," *Art Digest* 15 (March 15, 1941) 15.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Rockwell, "The Decade: 1920-1930," in Walt Reed, ed., *The Illustrator in America, 1900-1960s* (New York 1966) 77.

<sup>7</sup> The most recent article on these lintels, with citations to the earlier literature, is L. Y. Rahmani, "The Eastern Lintel of the Holy Sepulchre," *Israel Exploration Journal* 26 (1976) 120-129.