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Visual art in the English parish church since 1945

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Even the most fleeting of tours of the English cathedrals in the present day would give an observer the impression that the Church of England was a major patron of contemporary art. Commissions, competitions and exhibitions abound; at the time of writing Chichester cathedral is in the process of commissioning a major new work, and the shortlist of artists includes figures of the stature of Mark Wallinger and Antony Gormley. It is less well known that this activity is in fact a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early 1930s, by contrast, it was widely thought (amongst those clergy, artists and critics who thought about such things) that there was, in the strictest sense, no art at all in English churches. Of course, the medieval cathedrals and parish churches contained many exquisite examples of the art of their time. The nineteenth century had seen a massive boom in urban church building in the revived Gothic style, with attendant furnishings and decoration. However, the vast bulk of the stained glass, ornaments and church plate of the more recent past was regarded as hopelessly derivative at best, and of poor workmanship at worst. The sculptor Henry Moore wrote of the 'affected and sentimental prettiness' of much of the church art of his time. One director of the Tate Gallery argued that if the contents of churches were the only evidence available, 'our civilisation would be found shallow, vulgar, timid and complacent, the meanest there has ever been.' Much research remains to be done on that nineteenth century heritage, to determine how justly such charges were laid against it. However the perception was unmistakable in the early part of the twentieth; part of a wider turn in educated taste against that of the Victorian age. It was widely felt that the church had been a major (indeed, *the* major) patron of contemporary art in earlier ages. According to this particular reading of church history, this connection had been lost (indeed, thrown away) in the intervening centuries, and there was a need to restore it.

So it was that a small, informal yet determined coalition of clergy, critics and artists set out, in the twenty or so years spanning 1945, to restore that connection as best they could. Conferences were held, articles written in the specialist and general press, and networks formed. However, the most enduring remains of this endeavour are the small number of highly significant commissions of two men: George Bell, Bishop of Chichester (1929-58), and Walter Hussey (vicar of St Matthew's Northampton and then dean of Chichester, from 1955).

George Bell had been intent on re-establishing the link between the Church and the arts from his early days as dean of Canterbury (1924-9). Bell began with religious drama, commissioning in 1928 a

¹ <http://www.christianityandculture.org.uk/resources/epc>

new play for the cathedral from John Masefield; an event which in large part led to the establishing of a series of Canterbury plays, including *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot. After his translation to Chichester in 1929, opportunities began to present themselves to encourage new works of visual art in the churches of the diocese. He was instrumental in the successful completion of work by E.W. Tristram and the German refugee artist Hans Feibusch, in newly-built churches in Eastbourne and Brighton respectively. Bell was also prepared to defend the freedom of the artist against objections from within the church. On two occasions he had to contend with consistory court proceedings against proposed works of art: first, over murals by Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell at Berwick in 1941, and again in 1954 with regard to a Feibusch mural at Goring-by-Sea. On both occasions Bell threw all his persuasive weight behind the projects, in the second taking the unusual step of presiding over the court himself. These commissions, although unspectacular, when added to Bell's ceaseless public advocacy and private lobbying, accomplished a great deal in emboldening others within the church to follow.

The most audacious series of commissions of modern art in this period were those by Walter Hussey, vicar of St Matthew's, Northampton (1937-55). The first was part of a five-part programme to celebrate the church's jubilee in 1943, which included the commissioning of the new anthem *Rejoice in the Lamb* by Benjamin Britten. The final part of the programme, and by far the most controversial, was the *Madonna and Child* by the sculptor Henry Moore. Unveiled in 1944 by Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery, the piece attracted a great deal of publicity and comment in the local, national and specialist presses. It was followed two years later by the *Crucifixion* by Graham Sutherland, in the opposite transept of the church, which met with a similar if marginally less intense barrage of praise and excoriation.

By the time that Hussey had moved to the deanery at Chichester in 1955 (at George Bell's instigation), the novelty of the Northampton commissions had begun to wane, but momentum was yet to build behind the movement for new art in the church. The next ten to fifteen years saw a series of commissions in cathedral churches which were provide that additional impetus. After a quiet beginning, Hussey was to continue in Chichester where he left off at Northampton. Graham Sutherland again responded to Hussey's commission with a painting which stands in the Mary Magdalene chapel (*Noli me tangere*, 1961). Much more conspicuous in the building was a John Piper tapestry, a riot of colour and symbol, unveiled behind the high altar in 1966. Less controversial, but no less influential, were the series of works inside and outside the new Coventry cathedral; modern art for an unapologetically modern building. The new cathedral contains a baptistery window designed by John Piper, an enormous tapestry by Graham Sutherland behind the high altar, and a sculpture of St Michael, the church's patron saint, on the exterior wall of the porch, by Jacob Epstein, who had also contributed to the reconstruction of Llandaff cathedral some years before.

Sir Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery and maker of the celebrated television series *Civilisation*, and himself in his seventies, wrote a tribute to Hussey on the latter's retirement in 1975. 'What' he asked 'has the Church done in the way of enlightened patronage of contemporary art in the present century?' In Clark's mind at least, it had been Hussey alone who had had the courage to attempt to engage with contemporary artists. However, the period from the mid-1960s onwards in fact saw the upsurge in commissioning activity, the results of which may be seen today. Emboldened by the examples of Chichester, and Coventry cathedral, authorities in cathedrals and in newly built parish churches began to commission new works of art for those buildings. However, it was also the

case that the high-water mark of the Church's engagement with the leaders in British art had in fact already been reached. Never again in the twentieth century was the Church to achieve the same contact with artists of the stature of Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, and indeed Hussey's commissions as he neared retirement were of his own generation or older. The art world became more and more fragmented, with a bewildering variety of styles, each developing according to its own particular internal logic. The church continued to commission contemporary art, but now of certain styles amongst the many. Generally, commissions were confined to figurative art, since the task of interpreting abstract work in a Christian way presented considerable challenges. It had been the vision of men like Bell and Hussey that the church should position itself in the mainstream of the nation's life, including its art. There had now ceased to be a clearly visible mainstream in which the church could position itself.

Further reading

Peter Blee, 'Bishop Bell and the Art Commissions for the Chichester diocese with particular reference to the Bloomsbury paintings at Berwick church' *Humanitas. The Journal of the George Bell Institute* 10:2 (2009) 125-57.

Paul Foster, 'Goring Revisited: George Bell, the artist Hans Feibusch, and Art in Church' *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 6 (2001), 36-46

Walter Hussey, *Patron of Art* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985)

R.C.D Jasper, *George Bell, Bishop of Chichester* (London, OUP, 1967)

Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry* (London, Bles, 1962)

Peter Webster, "The "revival" of the visual arts in the Church of England, c.1935-c.1956", in *Studies in Church History* 44 (2008), 297-306.