

# Concordia

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### What about the Field of Christian Art?

Many of the older readers of this periodical will most likely recall their first introduction to the field of art. The chances are that this took place in connection with the small Andrae, *Erzaehlungen aus der Weltgeschichte*, particularly with the appendix of this fascinating volume. The colored pictures offered there, which so graphically showed some of the ancient Greek and Roman buildings, exerted at least some influence upon the thinking of many a *Quintaner*, possibly giving him the first stimulus toward a real appreciation of culture and art. If this initial incentive was later followed up by a timely reference to some more advanced book, such as Wagner and Kobilinski, *Griechische und roemische Altertueemer*, the foundation for a real appreciation of the finer things in life had been laid. Even if no further specific and detailed work in this field was later included in the course of study, the alert student had been given a good foundation on which he could then erect the structure of a wide and satisfying culture.

At present conditions are somewhat more favorable for an intensive training in the fundamentals of culture. The study of the humanities, as included in the course of study at our junior colleges, will do much toward establishing and developing an appreciation of the best products of the human mind through the centuries. The students are now being introduced to the masterpieces of ancient and modern literature, to the drama of the Greeks and Romans as well as that of modern times, to music from primitive times to our own day, to history from the standpoint of economics and the social relationships, to the effect of scientific research in our daily lives, and specifically in the fine arts as they are now commonly listed, in addition to those named above, architecture, sculpture and ceramics, painting and weaving, and all the related fields. To students who have this background the course in Christian art, which is now offered at the Seminary,

will give such additional stimulation and information as to enable them to have an appreciation of the truly beautiful in the art of men from the most primitive times to the present day, including the periods of the highest achievement as well as those of deterioration and decay.

Some such background is necessary if one would lay claim to being a person of culture, to possessing an understanding of the beautiful and the valuable in the intellectual heritage of the ages. It is particularly important if a pastor would desire to penetrate into the treasures of art as found in the Christian Church from the first century to the present time even in view of all iconoclastic disturbances and aberrations. Since scores of periodicals, including not only the high-class art magazines but even the Sunday supplements and the many picture journals which have recently attained to such a high popularity, are presenting a wide variety of subjects, also in the field of Christian art, and since art schools and museums are making an ever more urgent appeal to large masses of our population, it is inevitable that a pastor is also involved in many of the questions which are concerned in the discussion of our subject. Not only the graduates of colleges and universities in our congregations, but an increasing number of other persons who are making use of the leisure afforded in the present economic order, rightly expect a pastor to possess at least some acquaintance with the fundamentals of Christian art, so that he can express himself intelligently and correctly on its principal phases. And in this connection we stress also the practical side of such knowledge, for questions pertaining to our subject are constantly raised, not only when a congregation contemplates the erection of a new church-building but also when the decorations and the appointments of churches and parish-houses are under consideration.

It would, of course, betray one's ignorance to denounce all the masterpieces of music composed by Roman Catholic musicians simply because their composers were members of the Church of Rome. It would be folly to say that all paintings which do not represent scenes from the Bible or from sacred and church history from the standpoint of the Lutheran Church are rubbish from the standpoint of esthetics. *De gustibus non est disputandum*, says an old Latin proverb; but this does not set aside the fact that there may be beauty even where there is no orthodoxy. To use a comparison: there are hundreds of objects in nature all about us which possess the full perfection of the Creator's hand, both in beauty and in fitness for their particular purpose in their existence, but which we would nevertheless not place in our homes. There is no reason why we should be obliged to drop Homer and Horace

from our courses of study, or to regard the grandeur of Karnak and the majestic beauty of the Taj Mahal as the concepts of diseased minds. Nor is there any need of discarding all madonna pictures because the majority of them clearly indicate the spirit of Mariolatry, or of denying the glory of the cathedrals of Reims or of Amiens because they were planned by artists who were Roman Catholics.

The Lutheran pastor, as a man of culture, will distinguish between objects of art which are intrinsically out of harmony with the Christian belief and such as may in the proper associations serve the esthetic and even the devotional sense of a Lutheran Christian. One could hardly conceive of a Christian congregation which would place the statue of Buddha in its sanctuary, but it would not be wrong to select a bit of tapestry which originally had been woven by some Roman Catholic or even by a heathen weaver. There is many a hymn in our Lutheran hymn-books which was written by a member of another denomination, just as there is many a melody sung in our churches which has non-Lutheran or secular antecedents. If equilibrium is needed in the field of adiaphora, in "the borderland between right and wrong," with regard to questions of ethics, it is needed just as emphatically in the field of esthetics. The principles in either case, in fact, are the same or very similar. No one will declare the use of the wedding-march from *Lohengrin* at church weddings a sin, unsuited to a Christian house of worship as this selection is. Will the combination of four or five different styles of church architecture in itself invalidate the use of the Sacraments in the resulting monstrosity? Can a pastor (or a congregation) be charged with heresy because he insists upon using a home-made order of service which is absolutely devoid of liturgical coherence and significance?

The answers to these questions seem to be fairly obvious. And yet it would be folly for us to dismiss the entire discussion as immaterial. The dictum of Luther according to which he desired to place all the arts into the service of the Gospel deserves our most careful study. Generally speaking, the consensus in our circles, under the leadership of Luther and his contemporaries in Germany, and of Walther and the fathers of our Synod in this country, has been: That which properly and to the best effect serves the Gospel, in keeping with the history of the Lutheran Church and its doctrines and in accordance with its liturgical heritage, should be accepted and observed by us. The principle so stated will certainly permit of a wide latitude in its application, so that all but those holding extreme views will be satisfied.

Now, what can be done by a pastor who would make and keep himself informed in the field of Christian art? It certainly

is possible for the great majority of men in the field to become acquainted with the fundamentals of art as it is found from the beginning in the Christian Church, and specifically in the Lutheran Church. This can be done without interfering in any manner with the main work of a Lutheran pastor, namely, that of studying the Scriptures, preparing his sermons and other work of teaching, and taking care of his parish duties.

An acquaintance with the history and the principles of *church architecture* is of great value to every pastor. This is true not only because it will most likely happen in the course of the average ministry that a church-building will be erected and equipped, but also because a knowledge of the development of church-building is bound to give one a better appreciation of the relation between doctrines and attitudes, on the one hand, and the expression of these factors, on the other. When men express themselves in various forms of art, this is rarely, if ever, an accidental or fortuitous procedure. In most cases the product of man's brain and hands is symbolical; it gives expression to some belief or tenet, or at least to some state of mind. This was true even in the chapels of the catacombs, since the idea of the body of Christ or of a vessel or of a cross soon found its expression in the ground plan, supported by various other devices. It was true in the early Christian basilica, as probably influenced by the forensic type of structure as soon as the Christian religion was permitted to spread with little or no hindrance. The Byzantine type of church-building very definitely expresses the attitude of the Oriental Church, since its symbolism is connected with the notion of the power of the hierarchy. Even the cruciform type of the Byzantine style shows this symbolism, so that congregations in our days who select this type find themselves obliged to make certain alterations in the form to meet the needs of evangelical worship. Much more in keeping with the spirit of Christianity are the Romanesque and the Gothic types of church-buildings, since they can express, more or less distinctly, the fundamental ideas and the supreme aspirations of the Christian faith.

As one studies the various types of churches, also in their many subdivisions, new and interesting features are constantly presenting themselves. What, for example, is the relation, artistically speaking, between the classical *renaissance* in church-building, as exemplified in St. Peter's of Rome, and the doctrinal position of the church-body which fosters such buildings? What about the Baroque and the Rococo styles as developed chiefly under the *régime* of the Jesuits, also in one of their strangest offshoots in the Churrigueresque type of Central America? Is the so called California mission type of church-building a mere adaptat-

tion of the ancient basilica to climatic conditions, or is it expressive of some factor in the doctrinal position of the Church? The considerations connected with the answers to these questions are partly of a cultural, partly of a practical value. In any event they challenge the imagination and the intellect, and the student in the field will find himself reading with avidity whatever books or articles offer information on any phase of church architecture in which he may be interested. Even if his studies are not altogether systematic, he is bound to absorb facts and solutions as he goes along, and that is very much worth while.

In this connection our discussion is bound to touch upon *art in church furniture*, not so much with regard to choir-stalls and sedilia for the officiating clergy, or even credence tables (although their use is gaining ground), but chiefly with reference to altar and pulpit, lectern and baptismal font. Few men would care to withstand the fascination of tracing the history of the Christian altar from the simple and almost crude stone and wood tables to the elaborately carved and decorated altars, with their often magnificent and costly reredoses, of the present day. And hand in hand with this development the student in the field will have a splendid opportunity to study the relationship between the altar as an elaborate piece of furniture and as a symbol showing the doctrinal position of various church-bodies. Quite naturally the sacred vessels will come in for their share of attention at this point, not the Romish pyxes and tabernacles but the simpler host-boxes, patens, and chalices which are in common use in the majority of Lutheran churches. But an acquaintance also with the sacred vessels as used in both Roman and Reformed churches in our days will enable the student of Christian art to draw some interesting and valuable conclusions as to the relative importance of form and substance in various church-bodies.

On account of its paramount importance in Lutheran worship the pulpit should also receive careful attention in a study of Christian art. It is most fascinating to follow the epistle ambo of the early Church from its location on the south side of the choir into the *cancelli*, or rood-screen, to serve as the place of the lector and later also the expositor of Scriptures. And the history of the pulpit, as it took its independent place at or near the chancel or in the eastern part of the nave and as it changed its form through the centuries, carries one through the varying conceptions of the function of the minister as proclaimer of the Word, from early times through the period of the decay of preaching into the days of the Reformation. Nor will one's studies end here, for the resolutions of the Eisenach Conference and various recent monographs are suggesting further changes, both as to location

and form of the pulpit. The lectern has likewise been considered a development of an ambo, and the function of the ancient piece of furniture has in this case been more exactly retained according to many investigators.

Just as entire books have been written on the history and form of the altar and the pulpit, so the baptismal font has challenged the historian in the field of Christian art, so that we have some very comprehensive monographs in this field. And no wonder. For it seems a far cry from the early Christian baptistry, especially in its detached form, to the small font as it is in use in most Catholic and Protestant churches today. To study the baptismal font means, inevitably, to study the history of the baptismal rite. As far south as the southern edge of the Sahara Desert beautiful examples of baptistry pools have been discovered, and on the other hand, some of the most exquisite wood- and stone-carving as well as metal-casting is found in thousands of baptismal fonts now in use in all parts of Christendom. Needless to say, both the doctrinal and the liturgical element enter in very strongly in the study of the baptismal font.

Closely connected with art in Christian architecture and ecclesiastical furniture are the *arts of painting and of sculpture* as they have been placed into the service of the Church. In spite of all occasional newspaper reports to the contrary no portrait of the Savior exists whose authenticity can be established beyond a doubt. It is significant also that we seem to have such portraits of Peter and probably of Paul but that the early Church obviously avoided a pictorial reproduction of the Savior. For the earliest representations of Him are clearly figurative, the Good Shepherd being a favorite subject. It is fascinating, to say the least, for a person to study the conception of the face and figure of Jesus as held by the foremost artists from the days of the catacombs to the missionary churches in heathen countries, as, for example, in *Das Bild Jesu im Wandel der Zeiten*, published by Preuss. One can spend years, of course, in studying the various schools of painting in Italy, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and even in England and America, and one need not be a professional to appreciate many of the beautiful paintings that were produced by Roman Catholic artists and by Protestants as well. Various small handbooks on art appreciation will enable even a novice to understand the principles of art in painting and in sculpture, and possibly a wider dissemination of reliable information will help in reducing the number of unsightly and even ugly pictures now found in some of our churches.

Since weaving is commonly regarded as an art subsidiary to painting, we may well consider it in connection with *paraments*

*and vestments* in the Church. To one not familiar with the history and the symbolism of colors and of woven goods the entire field of paramentics may seem to be barren of real significance and value. But a careful study of this field will convince even the skeptic that there are canons of art and principles of beauty in connection with this field which might well stimulate one to become an ardent follower of Professor Beck or of some similar authority in this department of church art. The choice of goods and the color of the cloth used in the paraments is not a matter of arbitrary selections but is connected with some very fundamental conceptions of art, as acknowledged by connoisseurs in this field of Christian art. People who possess the correct information will usually also show the proper appreciation of things that are truly beautiful.

We can hardly close this brief discussion without referring to the fields of *liturgics and hymnology*. It is here, indeed, that a mind without prejudice, without preconceived notions, is required. It is a wonderful, an exhilarating experience to follow the development of Christian poetry from the days of the Syrians, the Alexandrians, and the Cappadocians all through the Middle Ages, with their truly admirable productions in the field of hymnology and liturgics, and then to use the same principles in promoting a truly Christian and Biblical order of worship, with both the liturgy and the hymns, together with the music, uniting in giving honor to the Lamb that was slain. And would it be altogether out of order if we should dare to go beyond the days of the Reformation and select some of the best examples of Christian worship, or parts of the worship, from the early Greek liturgies? We should hardly dare to assert that there was a liturgical succession, an uninterrupted development of the form of worship from the days of the apostles to the fourth century and beyond, when the Church was still close to its pristine purity. And yet there are indications enough that the so-called Ephesine liturgy at least was based upon models in use in the first century. And who will deny that the Apostolic Constitutions and Canons contain a nucleus of a very early form of worship and that further research work in this field will produce results that may influence church art, also in the field of liturgics?

No matter at what point we approach the study of Christian art, we are bound to find avenues leading to marvelous treasures. Would it not be well for us to consider also these treasures, including the liturgical heritage of our Church, as blessings to be studied and appreciated?

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