CHRISTIAN ART THROUGH HISTORY

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Few things of importance can be proved,

important things have to be felt and expressed.

Clive Bell

...nothing really important in life is in

the realm of provable fact.

Madeleine L'Engle

CHRISTIAN ART THROUGH HISTORY

I have felt the need to research Christian art through history, beginning with the first inception of Christian art appearing in the Roman catacombs around 200 A.D. (after the life and ministry of Jesus Christ) and following it to its 'height,' as many are of the opinion, in Byzantine mosaics and through the general downhill slope and out onto the diverse and sparse plains of contemporary Christian expression in art. For me, this was of the utmost importance to see where it began, how it was manifested in different eras, and closely linked to how, the why, the reasons for the different forms and emphases, and ultimately to try to discover for myself, a valid contemporary artistic expression with the view of discovering a personal way to incorporate and express Christian ideas and themes into my own work. An immediate problem that arose was one of definition. I have struggled with and worked through the definition of Christian art in my written concentration research paper, "Christian Expression in Contemporary Prints." For ease and clarification in this paper, Christian art will simply mean art which deals with Christian themes and subject matter unless otherwise described and explained. I only want to discuss the bare skeleton by highlighting some of the major turning points, people, and the reasons in history for these peaks and valleys. For me, the importance lies in the overall pattern and the reasons for the ebb and flow of Christian art.

The first attempts at Christian imagery are found in the Roman catacombs and the style of these wall paintings is basically one of imitating pagan styles found in Roman imperial art. Christ portrayed as the Good Shepherd, in the ceiling painting of the Catacomb of Priscilla, looks like a young Apollo-god (Fig. 1). This classical tradition, according to Eric Newton, began in Greece where "a conception of the gods and goddesses made in man's image had produced an art based on physical perfection that was again to dominate the whole of Europe from the Renaissance until the end of the nineteenth century."[1] As an 'underground' persecuted religion in the Roman empire, the Christian artists at this point were not capable of expressing in visual terms the full mystery of the invisible made visible, the Diety made human, the Christ incarnate. However, this quickly changed in 313 A.D. when the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and made it the state religion. The first worshippers had met secretly in private homes; but, now it became necessary to design a building which could house a mass of worshippers. The Christians adopted the Roman bascilica, an enclosed market place or public law court designed for large public assemblies, for their first churches. The basilican plan was capable of embodying some of the very basic Christian concepts and was further developed to symbolize them more directly; the outside atrium was considered a transition space from the outside world to the inside, spiritual world, the believer 'journeyed' down the nave towards his final goal found symbolically at the altar in the apse. The walls of the nave and the semi-dome of the apse provided the needed space for the mosaicist to develop Christian imagery. Not only was new imagery developed to express the new religion, but also the potential of the mosaic was

Fig. 1. <u>Good Shepherd</u>. Ceiling painting of burial chamber,
Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome. 200 A.D.

pushed to its heights to embody the essence of spiritual light. these bejeweled interiors symbolically emphasized the beautiful 'soul' of the believer; likewise the plain exterior of these churches downplayed the body and materialism in general. I agree with Clive Bell completely that the Byzantine art of the sixth century "is the primitive and supreme summit of the Christian slope." He further praises Christian art stating, "This alone seems to me sure: since the Byzantine primitives set their mosaics at Ravenna no artist in Europe has created forms of greater significance unless it be Cézanne."[2] For me, the peak of Christian art is expressed in the church Sant' Apollinaire Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy, founded in 490, mosaics 556-65 (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). A procession of male and female saints proceed on one side from the port of Classe to the enthroned Madonna and Child, and on the other side of the nave from the palace of Ravenna to the enthroned Christ.[3] This celestial procession is alive with shimmering, unearthly light, achieved by gold leaf fused between layers of transparent glass, set at slightly different angles to capture the light and reflect it back. This gold background or atmosphere symbolizes the spiritual realm and was also utilized in manuscript illumination and wall paintings even up to the work of Duccio in the early 1300's (Fig. 4). The Byzantine mosaicist is the supreme example of an artist who "is less concerned with visual truth than with the meaning behind it: and that, in fact, the more he sacrifices meaning to appearance, the less he can expect to succeed in producing a work of Christian art."[4] With this criteria as noted by Eric Newton, it follows that more realistic art, art concerned with physical appearances cannot embody the religious or spiritual idea as fully as an art which is concerned with a symbolic language used to
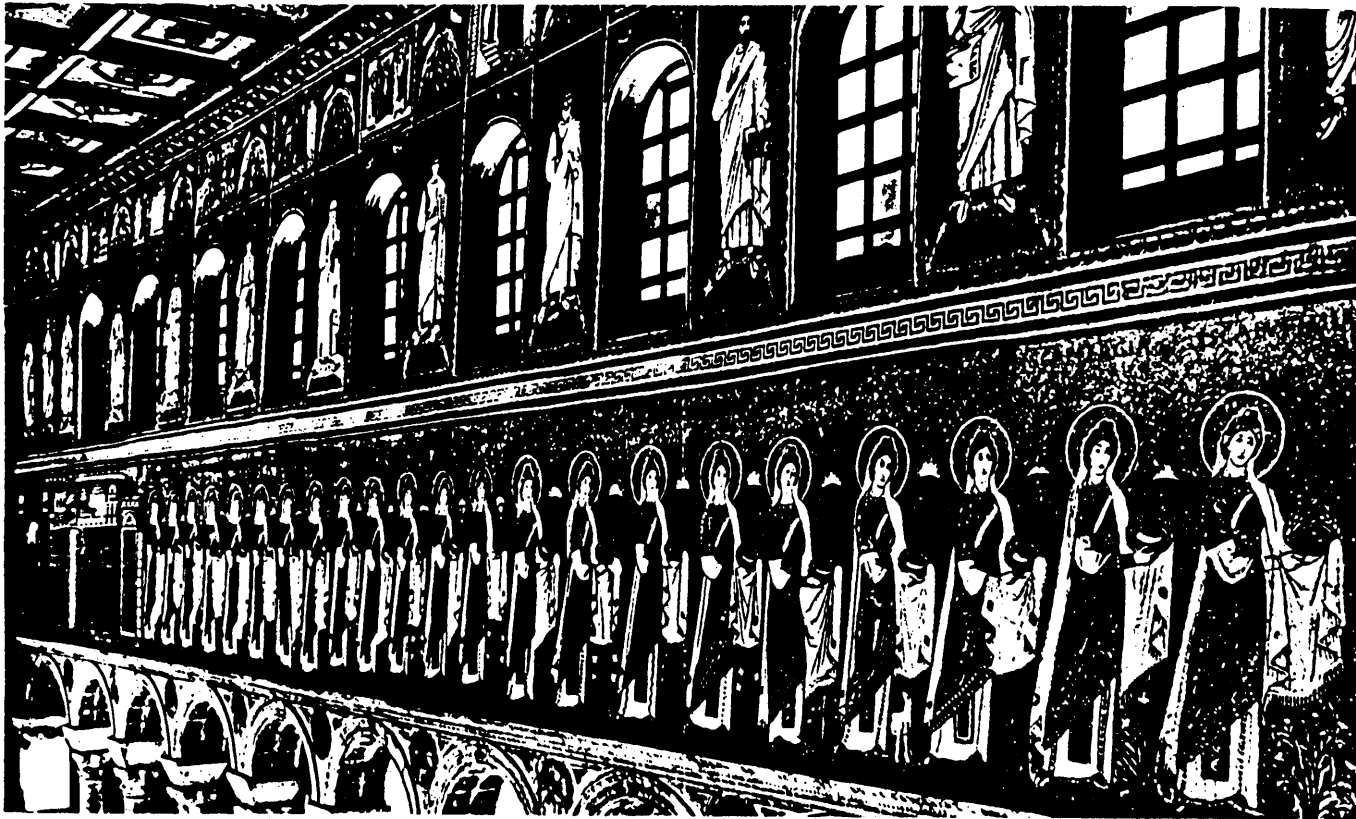
Fig. 2. The Procession of Female Saints. Mosaic,
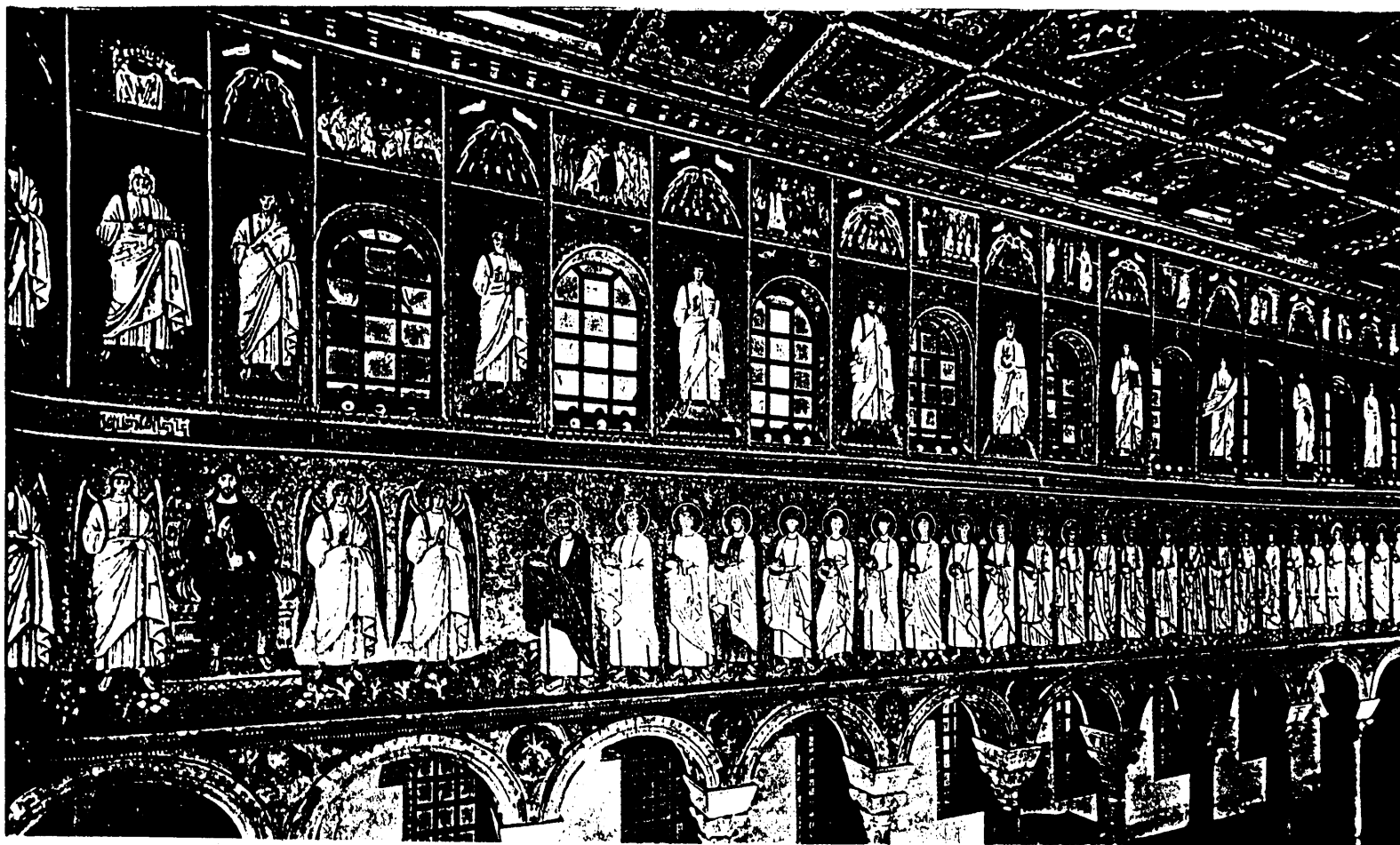St. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. 556-65.

Fig. 3. The Procession of Male Martyrs. Mosaic,
St. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. 556-65.

Fig. 4.   Duccio. The Entry into Jerusalem.
Panel from the Maesta, Sienna.   1308-11.

express the mystery of God. This is also discovered by Clive Bell when he compares "the vital art that drew its inspiration from the Christian movement and transmuted all its borrowing into something new,...(to the) continuous output of work based on the imitation of classical models."[5] Christian art begins like "a great primitive morning, when men create art because they must, and (then comes) that darkest hour when men confound imitation with art."[6] This imitation of nature continues until the end of the nineteenth century, and then at last, at the beginning of the twentieth century the emphasis on representational truth slackens and a new kind of symbolism begins to replace it. And even though this is a symbolism which could be used by Christian artists, the cultural consensus at this time is post-Christian and, as we shall see, becomes post-humanistic after World War II. Now let's turn briefly to what Clive Bell refers to as the 'downhill slope' of Christian art.

As with André Malraux points out, "That illusionist art which the West once prized so highly is no longer regarded as the climacteric of art's eternal quest or as providing the art historian with one of his surest criteria of values. It is...(simply) a particular phase of painting which lasted from 1400 to 1860...."[7] The power of the artist to describe the world of phenomena began in Italy in the fourteenth century and increased until the seventeenth century when the artist could solve almost any problem of weight, volume, perspective, light, etc. This involvement with the material/physical realm lessened the artist's ability to communicate the spiritual, otherworldly realm. The shape or forms which art takes in the different periods throughout history are directly related to the world view which needs to be expressed. Francis Schaeffer aptly described it this way, "Styles

themselves are developed as symbol systems or vehicles for certain
world views or messages....Art in the Renaissance became more natural
and less iconographic."[8]

Let's look at the work of Giotto, as a turning point from
Medieval art to the beginnings of the humanistic Renaissance.
Historical scenes, from the Bible, according to H. R. Rookmaaker, were
no problem to medieval man. "He meant his picture to be a symbol of a
truth deeper than the eye can see."[9] But with Giotto, the emphasis
starts to shift from the spiritual idea of a work to the portrayal of
natural phenomena. Even though the subject matter is still Christian,
even though Giotto and others working in the early Renaissance are
definitely within a cultural consensus that is Christian, and although
there is no reason not to believe that Giotto himself was a believer,
still the shift begins here. In fact, George Vasari wrote in his Lives
of the Artists, "Giotto who had made so many beautiful works of art and
whose devout life as a Christian matched his achievements as a painter,
gave up his soul to God."[10] Some of Giotto's most moving work is found
in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy (Fig. 5). The space of these
frescoes, done in 1305-1306, is organized like a great stage, with
emphasis on the dramatic figures set like actors in a realized
environment. Giotto turned away from the highly refined linear
Byzantine art in which forms were set against a spaceless and airless
gold ground. His efforts were to render the physical volume of figures,
define spacial perspective, and include naturalistic landscapes and
environments for his figures. Clive Bell notes that "from the peak that
is Giotto the road falls slowly but steadily. Giotto heads a movement

Fig. 5.   Giotto. The Lamentation.   Fresco,
Arena Chapel, Padua.   1306.

towards imitation and scientific picture making."[11] The fifteenth

century in Italy brought about a new humanism; a humanism focused upon

literature, history, and philosophy for their own sake, rather than for

the glory of God. The Renaissance was the arrival of a new faith in

material beauty, a look to the classical past, and an attempt to

integrate these with spiritual truth. Few artists were successful in

their attempt to achieve both.

During the high Renaissance, the art becomes even more

humanistic and less religiously oriented. Eric Newton traces this

tendency once again to pre-Christian Greece, where "God was conceived as

made in man's image--a symbol not of the Supernatural but of the

idealized 'natural'"[12] It was at this time that Michelangelo put forth

his thesis that all beauty exists in the human form.[13] And this idea

is vividly portrayed in his idealized, classical figures on the ceiling

of the Sistine Chapel. During the later part of his life however, he

became "increasingly convinced that his earlier work, such as the

ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, had been not an authentic witness to the

Christian faith but, rather, an exercise in Promethean pride."[14] It was

not until towards the end of his long life that he could transcend the

humanism of the High Renaissance. In his later works, he moves away

from naturalism and finally in his Pietà Rondanini, he moves away from

the idealized human figure (Fig. 6). Though Catholic, he was not

unmoved by the spirit of the Reformation; and he came to realize that

idealized humanity cannot serve as an adequate symbol for expressing the

Christian faith. His Pietà Rondanini is Catholic in the sense that it

is representational art and thus communicates the reality of the

incarnate God; but, it is Protestant in its proclamation that

Fig. 6. Michelangelo. <u>The Rondanini Pietà</u>. Unfinished, 1564.

Christianity can only be symbolized in terms of human brokenness.[15]
Michelangelo, on his deathbed, asked his friends to recall to him the
sufferings of Christ; so we see that even at the high and final period
of the Renaissance when humanism was gaining a stronger foothold, that
still Christianity played a major role in the motivation of individual
artists.[16]

Whereas in Italy, art was aiming at a new secular and scientific
understanding of the world, the Renaissance in Northern Europe was
taking a slightly different course. The artists there were also
influenced by the new empiricism, but they did not consider their
purpose achieved through realistic illusionism. Rather, as Otto Benesch
notes, these artists' "final aim was to give an old religious content a
new intensity and nearness to life."[17] While in Italy the shift was
away from old religious values to new humanistic concepts, "the medieval
spirit remained in power in the north much longer than in the south, and
it ruled the Germanic countries especially in unbroken strength
throughout the major part of the fifteenth century, which in Italy at
the very beginning brought about the rise of a new humanism, a new
science, and a new grammar of artistic forms."[18] Within this tradition
of the Northern Renaissance falls the work of Albrecht Dürer and Mathias
Grünewald (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). Grünewald is a striking example of an
artist putting the new language of descriptive detail, linear
perspective, naturalistic landscape, and anatomically realized figures
to the service of an expressive Christian work. He has successfully
combined the mysticism of the medieval world, including its sheer
ugliness,with the descriptive language of the Renaissance. It is
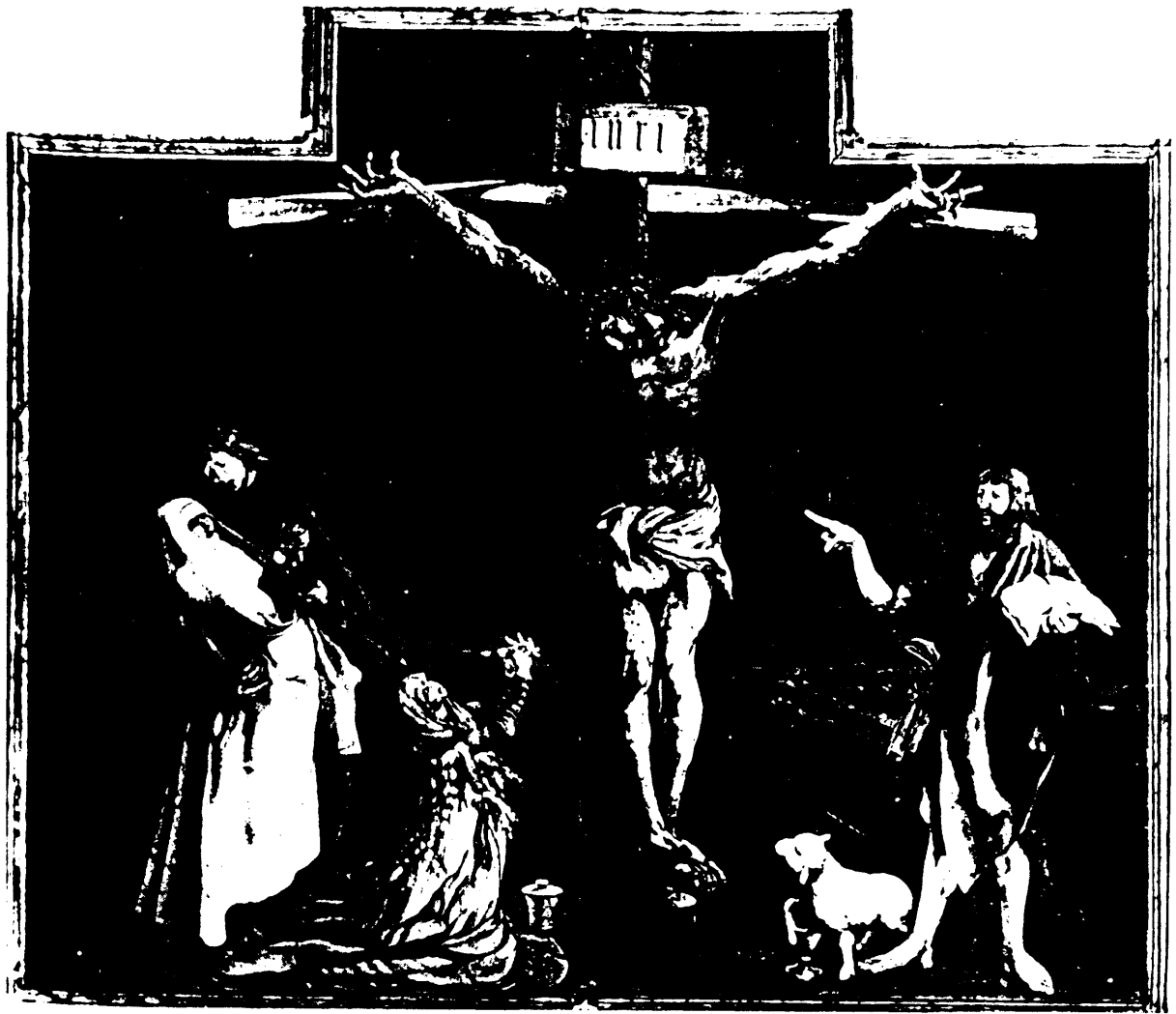precisely because of his involvement with expressive mysticism, that

Fig. 7. Grünewald. The Crucifixion.
Isenheim Altarpiece, Colmar. 1513-15

Fig. 8. Grünewald. Christ on the Cross.
Detail from Isenheim Altarpiece, Colmar. 1513-15

Grünewald has directly influenced twentieth century artists,
specifically the printmaker, Rico Lebrun, and the English artist, Graham
Sutherland.

Rembrandt is another artist capable of describing the reality of
the world with spiritual significance. With the Renaissance and the
rise in greater pictorial realism, artists were faced with the problem
of depicting historical scenes from the Bible in either
symbolic/spiritual terms or in historically correct, realistic terms.
This was a problem that hadn't even been considered by medieval man. If
the artist realizes the work 'correctly' as a camera could have recorded
it, then he often reduces the event to only historical interest; but if
he emphasizes the true, timeless message, then he often must sacrifice
the historical factuality of Christianity. Because of this dilemma many
of the seventeenth century artists in countries of the Reformation, in
Holland, for instance, gave up depicting biblical scenes altogether.[19]
Rembrandt was one of the few artists able to emphasize the spiritual in
an historical, realistic setting (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). In making
Christianity his main theme, Rembrandt portrays its drama with a "depth
of feeling that includes divinity, mystery, and the unfathomable
workings of the supernatural; Giotto was the first to possess this
almost inexplicable gift, Rembrandt the last."[20] Rembrandt's
contemporaries in Holland were concerned with the materialistic,
realistic details of everyday living and they rarely made the attempt to
integrate the spiritual narratives into their work in the wonderfully
intimate way that Rembrandt did.

The Reformation was an integral part of the Renaissance and the
religious outgrowth of some of the basic tenets of the Renaissance, such

Fig. 9. Rembrandt. <u>Christ Preaching</u>. Etching. 1652.

Fig. 10.   Rembrandt. The Three Crosses. Etching, fourth state. 1660.

as: rising nationalism, the growth of individualism, and the rediscovery of the values of this world and of man, himself. The Reformation began in 1517, with the German, Luther, who became convinced of the grace of God being sufficient for salvation. Another reformer was John Calvin whose <u>Institutes of the Christian Religion</u> set the austere Protestant tone in Holland. In describing the split between the Catholics and the Protestants, Eric Newton points out that the art also took on divergent forms to express the two differing world views behind the work:

> Without genius, Protestantism could achieve little but
> prosaic materialism while Catholicism had little to
> offer but a set of formulae for religious ecstasy. On
> the one hand we are restricted to the furniture of the
> kitchen or the virginals and wine-glasses of the front
> parlour, on the other, we find rolling clouds,
> melodramatic gestures, theatrical transports and the
> whole emotional overstatement invented by the Baroque
> artists in order to replace sincerity by
> effectiveness.[21]

Art in the seventeen the century was represented by these two different attitudes to life: Protestant and Catholic, austerity and exuberance, pedestrian realities and soaring themes.[22] But these two different attitudes are not a contrast in ultimate religious loyalties. And as William Neil aptly reveals, both are expressions of a common faith in God which was violently attacked in the following centuries and ultimately rejected by what had been largely Christendom or at least for the most part a Christian consensus. When man and not God became the supreme measure of all things, then "the conflict between Catholic and Protestant was at once irrelevant."[23]

Now we must turn for a brief look at the eighteenth century--
'The Enlightenment' or 'The Age of Reason.' Because of the power of the Reformation, Humanism was contained for a time, but with the

Enlightenment there is a resurgence of the principles of Humanism.[24]
Descartes' cogito, ergo sum, (I think, therefore I am), exemplifies the
philosophical atmosphere of the time; one which emphasized man's
reasoning and the rational intellect. Truth and reality became only
those things which could be weighed, measured, and documented by the
senses or rationally proven by the intellect. Lost was what Madeleine
L'Engle defines as our "archaic understanding, a willingness to know
things in their deepest, most mythic sense."[25] She also points out that
"Cogito, ergo sum, nudges us on to depend solely on intellectual control
and if we insist on intellectual control we have to let go of our
archaic understanding and our high creativity, because keeping them
means going along with all kinds of things we can't control."[26]
Rookmaaker tells this ironic anecdote about Descarte: after he had made
his great discover of cogito, ergo sum, his famous method to determine
human certainty without biblical realities, "he made a pilgrimage to the
Virgin Mary to thank her!"[27] In the eighteenth century, the work of
Descartes and other philosophers, and even theologians began by
questioning divine revelation in the Bible and ended by doubting the
existence of the divine at all. The loss of our 'archaic understanding'
is further shown in Bultmann's statement "that in our modern
technological age we cannot believe the things the Bible presents as
real. That would mean a sacrifice of intellect." Rookmaaker reasons
thus, "We have reduced reality, and technological reality is nothing but
a box limited by the scientist's approach to reality, leaving out
everything that is beyond rationalistic reason and naturalistic
nature."[28]

How was this 'rationalistic reason' and 'naturalistic nature' worked out in the art of the eighteenth and nineteenth century? So deeply did Goya understand the consequences of rationalistic reason that he produced an etching titled, <u>The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters</u> (Fig. 11). The Romantic movement of this time was a reaction against the realistic work which only portrayed the appearance of things; the Romantic artist needed to portray something more than mere appearance. In their desire to do this, Eric Newton believes that Romanticism and its emphasis on the landscape led to a pantheism--"a worship not of God but of nature in all her aspects."[29] In discussing the work of the Northern Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich (Fig. 12 and 13), Robert Rosenblum describes the Romantic artist's dilemma as one of struggling with:

> how to express experiences of the spiritual, of the
> transcendental without having recourse to such
> traditional themes as the Adoration, the Crucifixion,
> the Resurrection, the Ascension, whose vitality, in the
> Age of Enlightenment was constantly being sapped.[30]

One recourse was to see God everywhere in nature, in the landscape. In Eric Newton's opinion, the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti (Fig. 14), Millais, and Madox Brown overcame the Romantic dilemma to a degree by depicting the traditional Christian themes, but more importantly by expressing and emphasizing the spiritual meaning behind the portrayed happening.[31] He feels that "They recovered for Protestantism something of William Blake's sense of the 'mystic harmonies that beat upon sense and sight'...."[32]

As we near the end of the nineteenth century, many scientific, philosophical, and even economic phenomena led to an undermining of the

Fig. 11.   Goya.   The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters.   Etching.
1797.

Fig. 12. Friedrich. Abbey Under Oak Trees. 1810.

Fig. 13. Friedrich. Monk by the Sea. 1809

Fig. 14.   Rossetti.   The Annunciation.   1850.

Christian faith in these overwhelming societal changes. The Industrial
Revolution brought materialistic consequences, the increasingly hostile
tone of philosophy brought doubt, the publication of Darwin's Origin of
Species in 1859 brought creation into question and thus all of biblical
revelation, the optimism of the wealth produced by mechanical revolution
and the prolongation of life and miraculous cures of medical science led
to the belief in the progress of man towards a human created and human
obtainable utopia. In simplistic terms, Humanism was in full swing, and
the prospects for the survival of Christianity looked slim.

The intense focus on realism and scientificism was vividly
expressed in the work of the Impressionists at the turn of the century.
They sought to paint only what the eye could see, only what actually
struck the retina of the eye and excited it to produce the phenomena we
call vision. This was in fact reducing reality to only what could be
experienced with the senses, in this case the sense of sight. The
Pontillists carried the idea a little further by painting with little
'points' of pure color to illustrate the theory of color in their actual
work. A change in emphasis from the exact 'look' of phenomena to the
art of discovering a visual equivalent to express emotions began with
the Post-Impressionistic work of Van Gogh and Gauguin. Here at last
arose the possibility of developing a symbolism capable of expressing
the supernatural. We need only to compare Van Gogh's The Good Samaritan
(Fig. 15) to Delacroix's work on the same subject, or the comparison
that Eric Newton makes between Gauguin's:

> Jacob Wrestling with the Angel that has none of
> Delacroix's heroic academicism or Ruben's vigorous
> materialism behind it. It is a frank return to the
> puritanism and innocence of medieval art and for that
> reason it leaps backwards at a single bound, across the

Fig. 15.   Van Gogh.   The Good Samaritan, after Delacroix. 1890.

gulf that had been gradually widening, ever since the beginning of the Renaissance.[33] (Fig. 16 and 17).

Gauguin's <u>Yellow Christ</u> turns the old realism into a new symbolism. (Fig. 18) However, in Tahiti, Gauguin constructs a new mythology concerned with man's relationship to his gods; and although it is not Christian, it is based on an understanding of the mystery behind prosaic life. According to Rookmaaker, Gauguin "wanted to overcome the positivist approach to reality, with (as Gauguin said himself) its loss of all feeling 'for the mystery and enigma of the great world in which we live!'"[34]

This new emphasis on the emotional, on form that is expressive of the unseen, or Expressionism as it has been identified in art history, has led to the reemergence of an art that is capable of a powerful Christian expression. However, as Eric Newton points out, the twentieth century has produced very little in service to Christianity in comparison with the Romanesque and Gothic periods, yet that little, when compared to the eighteenth century, is "so intensely felt and so fully expressed." [35] Many of the German Expressionists (i.e. Emil Nolde, Max Beckman, and Karl Schmidt-Rotthuff) successfully revealed the meaning behind the religious narrative in their works (Fig. 19 and 20). In describing <u>The Crucifixion</u> by Graham Sutherland, finished in 1947 (Fig. 21), Eric Newton praises it as a

> "triumph of the Expressionist method, the fusion of fact with symbol, in which the fact has been sufficiently distorted to intensify meaning and the symbol simplified so that its impact is direct and never obscure....(it is) the evidence of an Expressionist determination to find the visual equivalents of the timeless meaning of the Crucifixion."[36]

Fig. 16. Gauguin. The Vision after the Sermon
(Jacob Wrestling with the Angel). 1889.

Fig. 17. Delacroix. Jacob Wrestling with the Angel. 1956-61.

Fig. 18. Gauguin. Yellow Christ. 1889.

Fig. 19. Nolde. The Last Supper. 1909.

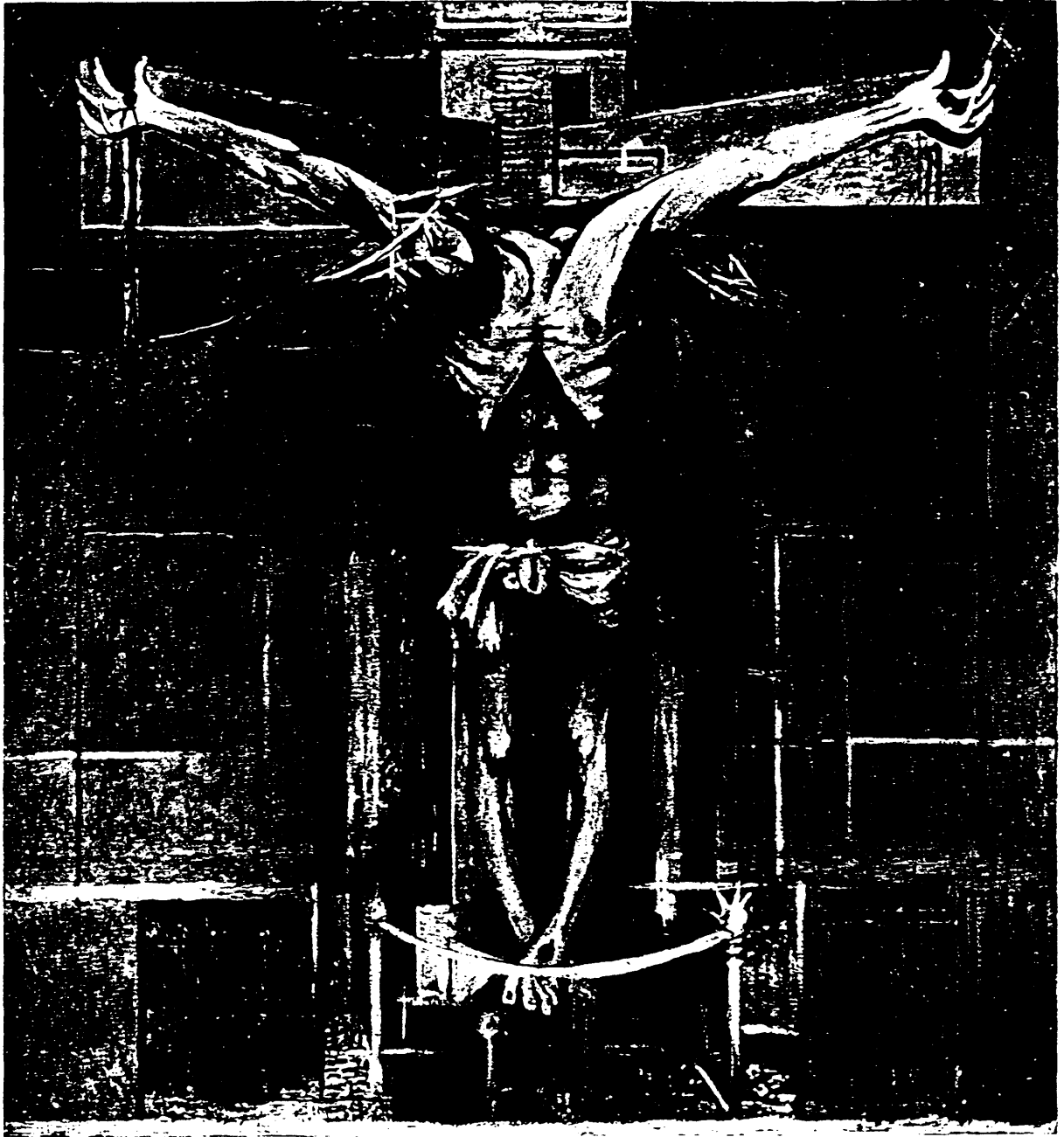Fig. 20. Beckman. <u>Jacobs Wrestling with the Angel.</u> Etching. 1920.

Fig. 21. Sutherland. The Crucifixion. St. Mathew's, Northhampton.
1946.

The twentieth century's disillusionment in morals and religion was brought on partly by the disillusionment of two World Wars, partly by the agnosticism of 'popular peddlers,' and partly by the materialism which resulted from too rapid a development of technology. William Neil further speculates that the decades between the two World Wars, saw the traditional pattern of Christian belief and moral standards shattered and discredited.[37] The optimism of man's evolutionary progress by means of humanitarian idealism and technical prowess were shattered; the twentieth century had begun in humanistic hope, but this hope ended after the World Wars, an international economic crisis and the development of the atomic bomb, with a cultural consensus that is not only post-Christian, but post-Humanism. The work of the Dadaist exemplifies this spiritual or lack of spiritual environment. John Canaday enlightens us as to the reason or lack of reason behind the Dadaist's work, "The function of art which always was to make sense out of chaos was outmoded because sense couldn't be made out of anything."[38]

Where does the Christian artist of the twentieth century stand in the midst of this pluralistic and changing society which has little room for eternal icons? As as Albert Moore further adds, there isn't any "set of images and symbols which are commonly accepted and valued."[39] The twentieth century artist lives in an age that doesn't know what it believes; gone is the ideal situation of the Byzantine artist in which the symbolic images are received by a community who understands and values their meaning. The twentieth century artist works alone, subjectively and in varied styles; he is expected to express his own unique individual self rather than communicate an interpretation of a communal theme. There are few examples in this century of an artist

working for a community of believers, doing artwork which will be used

in a worship setting, and which will be appreciated and understood by

the believers. Two contemporary examples mentioned by Eric Newton, in

which the buildings themselves are intrinsically related to the artwork

which they contain are the Burghclere Chapel and Coventry Cathedral,

both in England (Fig. 22 and 23).

Although society at large is non-Christian and thus you would

expect it to not have a demand for art expressing religious values, the

perplexing situation is that the church, especially Protestantism, has

turned its back on the visual artist. Rookmaaker makes the point that,

"the fact that most Christians did not take part in the arts and the

general trends of culture to any extent allowed them to become

completely secular, and in the long run even contrary to

Christianity."[41] Calvinistic and Puritan movements had virtually no

appreciation for the fine arts due to the mystic idea that the arts were

worldly; this dualism compartmentalized life into the spiritual and the

secular. So, on the one hand the Protestants were no longer interested

in the 'worldly' arts or they held the other extreme that the arts had

to translate themselves into utilitarian usefulness. This idea of art

as merely a sentimental illustration of Bible narratives is found in the

work of Holman Hunt (Fig. 24). Almost all 'Christian art' has followed

this line in Bible illustrations and Sunday school pictures. Rookmaaker

stresses that there is so much idealism, "so much of a sort of pseudo-

devotional sentimentality in these pictures that they are very far from

the reality the Bible talks about."[42] This theology or message derives

from nineteenth century liberalism which, as described by William Neil,

"had filled the churches with docile and complacent

Fig. 22.   Spencer.   The Resurrection, Burghclere
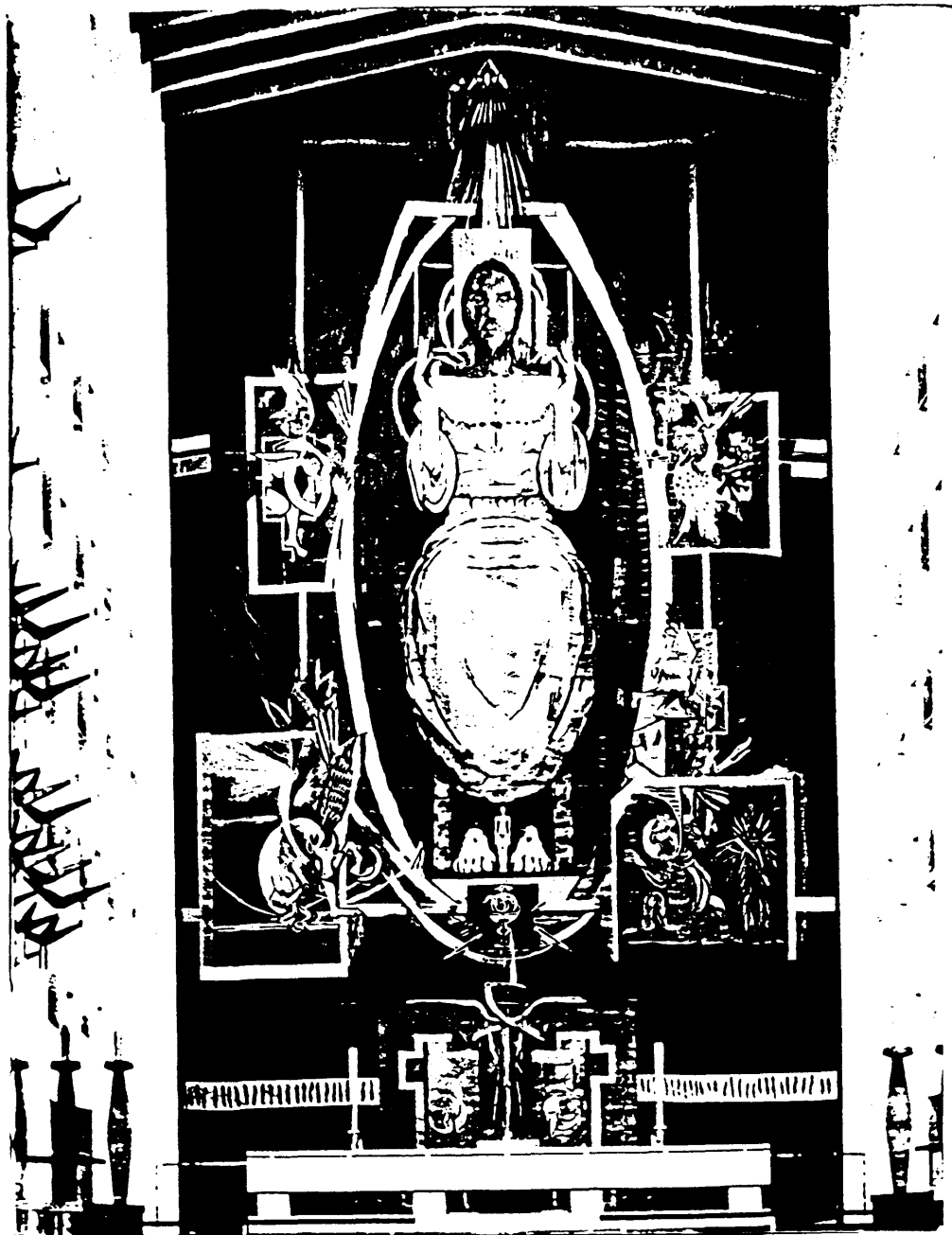   Memorial Chapel, Newbury, 1927-32.

Fig. 23. Sutherland. Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph.
Tapestry on the east wall of Coventry Cathedral.
1952-62.

Fig. 24. Holman Hunt. The Shadow of Death. 1800's

believers who had not even begun to understand the depth and mystery of the faith they professed to follow."[43]

When the twentieth century artist does work with biblical subject matter, according to Jane Dillenberger, the traditional symbols "are transmuted and evoke differing and contrary associations" or the artist must create his own symbols.[44] When the artist is dealing with traditional symbols, a large number of this proportionally small group use the Crucifixion as their theme, some examples that come to mind are: Georges Ronault (Fig. 25), Marc Chagall, Max Beckman, Edvard Munch, Graham Sutherland, Pablo Picasso, Rico Lebrun, Abraham Rattner, and Barnett Newman. Jane Dillenberger believes that "the twentieth century artist sees an analogy and paradigm in the death of Christ upon the cross to his own confrontation with suffering, anxiety, and pain."[45] Many of these artists have survived two World Wars and they see the suffering and death of Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of suffering and death for each individual. This is the experience of this generation, rather than the exalted majesty of Christ as portrayed by the Byzantine artist.

What happens when the artist is struggling to find meaningful symbols and must create his own? As we noted, beginning with Post Impressionism, the artist begins seeking the reality that is more than mere appearance and rebels against the Enlightenment dogma of the senses and rational logic being the only source of knowledge. This search is one in which the artist seeks absolutes, the deeper reality of human life, and the truth behind physical reality; this led to a new kind of art, abstract art which is concerned with the spiritual, irrational, and mystical. The Abstract Expressionists reacted to the 'crisis of faith'

Fig. 25. Rouault. <u>Christ on Cross</u>. Miserere Series. Etching. 1922-27.

after World War II by rejecting all styles that derive from a faith in human rationality, technology, and the values of an affluent culture. Contrary to popular criticisms, the Abstract Expressionists works, specifically those of Newman (Fig. 26 and 27), Gottlieb, and Rothko, are not art practiced for its own sake. "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing," declared Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman in a letter to The New York Times." We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless."[46] Other contemporary artists are struggling with this need to recover the mystical value of art, but in a slightly different manner. Artists such as Miro, Dubuffet, and Klee are seeking a magical symbolism through which man relates himself to his environment, his community, and his god/gods--a return to art that was created for a specific and necessary purpose, like the cave art of primitive man, like the religious art of Ravenna! A return to art that expressed unquestioned communal values! John Canady contends that the work of Miro would not be out of place in a prehistoric cave "if cave art had developed, let us say, a rococo period."[47] But here is where the contemporary artist's problem lies; in realizing the emptiness of purely realistic art, he has sought the meaning behind form, but within a culture that doesn't know what it believes. In a desperate attempt to recapture the very purpose of art, this is the expression in visible form of the ultimate values that men live by, these artists have created new forms/magical symbols. But do these new forms speak to us? As Canaday points out, it may be just as difficult for these artists to reach people with their magical symbols as it has been for the artist to reach them with his intellectualized abstractions--"for magic is meaningless unless we are allowed to
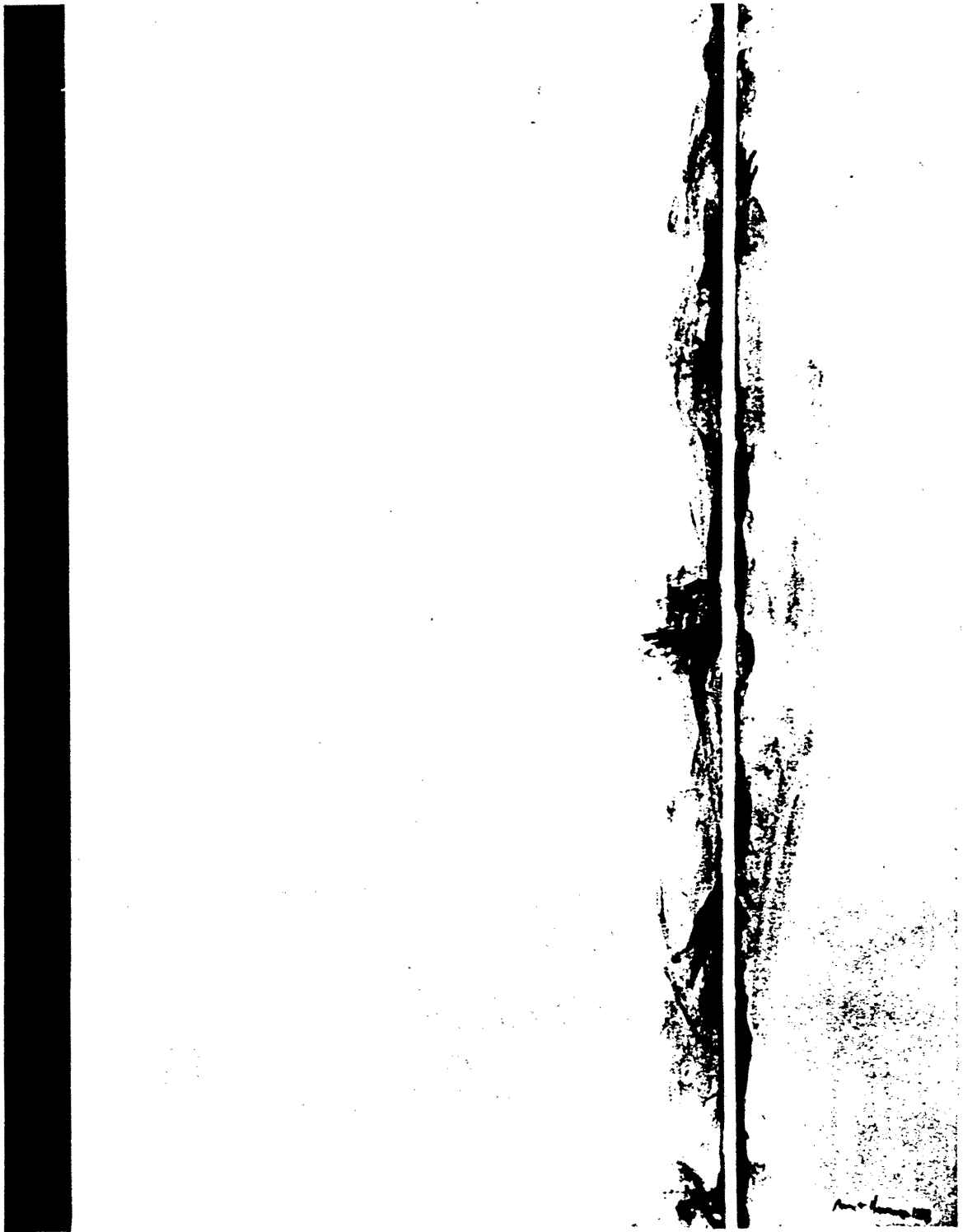
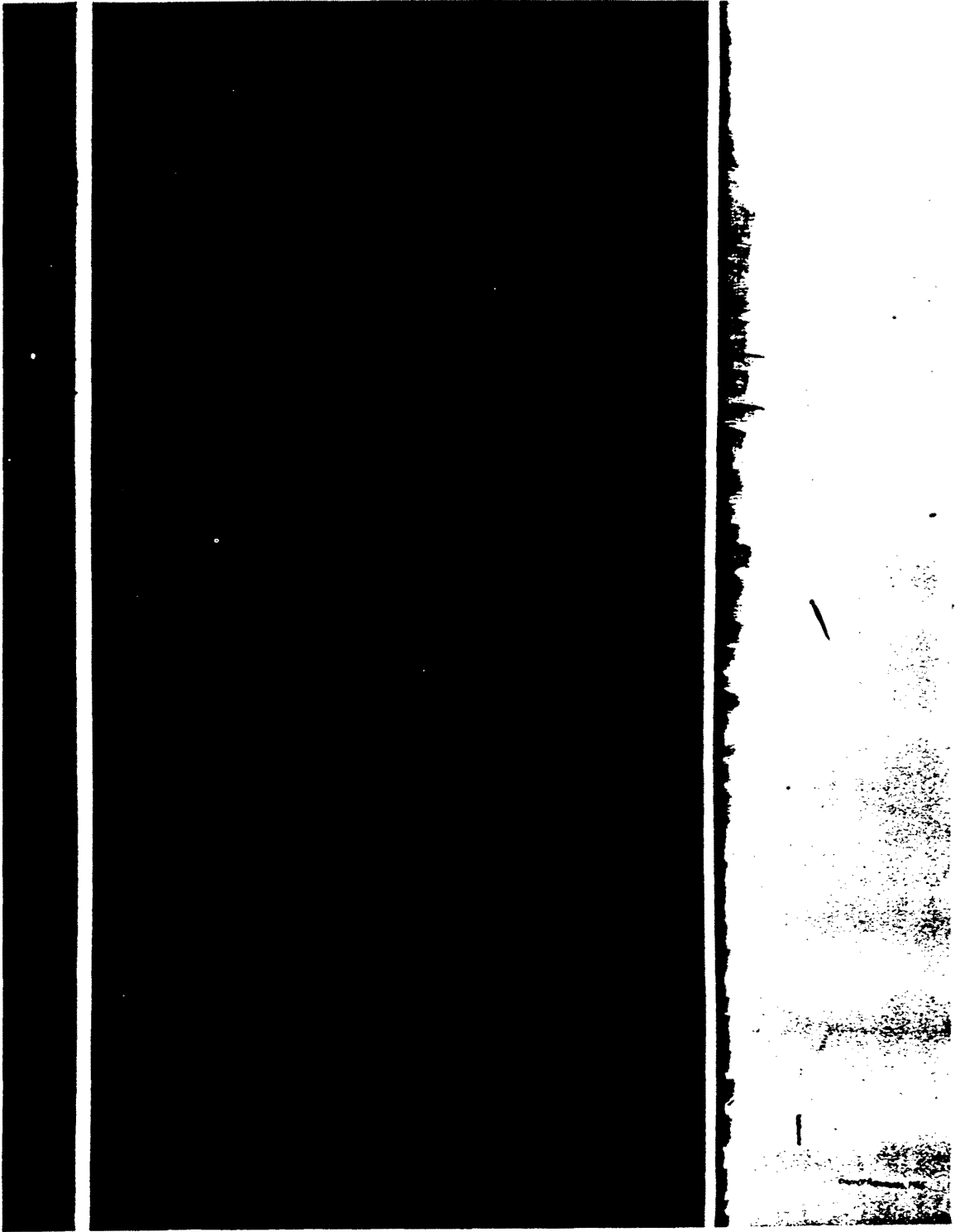Fig. 26.   Newman.   First Station from the Stations of the Cross.   1958

Fig. 27.   Newman.   Twelfth Station from the Stations of the Cross.
1965.

participate in its ritual"[48] Ideally, Christian art is expressive about the unseen/spiritual and uses symbolic language that a community of believers understand and values. This is where modern art falls short; we now have a return to symbolic art which expresses the unseen/mystical, but the symbols are from the artist's "private vocabulary in which he continues to talk to himself."[49] There is no community consensus of shared values for the artist to direct his language to; there is no community for the artist.

"It is not the preacher or the sociologist who speaks to us the most clearly of the 'crisis in civilization' in which we are involved but the artist," contends Rookmaaker.[50] Modern art, with its loss of God and the humanistic ideal is the mirror of our age.

ENDNOTES

[1]Eric Newton and William Neil, 2000 Years of Christian Art, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 16-17.

[2]Clive Bell, Art, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), pp. 93-94.

[3]George Zarnecki, Art of the Medieval Works: Architecture, Scuplture, Painting, Sacred Arts, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975), p. 57.

[4]Newton and Neil, p. 14.

[5]Bell, p. 97.

[6]Bell, pp. 89-90.

[7]Andre Malraux, The Metamorphosis of the Gods, trans. Stuart Gilbert, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), p. 22.

[8]Francis Schaeffer, Art and The Bible, Two Essays, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), p. 52.

[9]H. R. Rookmaaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture, 2nd ed., (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-varsity Press, 1973), p. 16.

[10]Franky Schaeffer, Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts, (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), p. 97.

[11]Bell, p. 104.

[12]Newton and Neil, p. 125.

[13]Albert C. Moore, Iconography of Religions: An Introduction, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 265.

[14]Ronald Goetz, "Finding the Face of Jesus," The Christian Century, 21-28 March 1984, p. 301.

[15]Goetz, p. 302.

[16]Franky Schaeffer, p. 100.

[17]Otto Benesch, The Art of the Renaissance in Northern Europe, Its Relation to the Contemporary Spiritual and Intellectual Movements, Rev. ed. (Greenwich, Connecticut: Phaidon Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 3.

[18]Benesch, p. 3.

[19]Rookmaaker, pp. 16-17.

[20]Newton and Neil, p. 191.

[21]Newton and Neil, p. 182.

[22]Newton and Neil, p. 218.

[23]Newton and Neil, p. 216.

[24]Rookmaaker, p. 43.

[25]Madeleine L'Engle, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art, (Toronto: Bamtam Books, 1982), p. 89.

[26]L'Engle, p. 91.

[27]Rookmaaker, p. 39.

[28]Rookmaaker, p. 72.

[29]Newton and Neil, p. 245.

[30]Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 15.

[31]Newton and Neil, p. 248.

[32]Newton and Neil, p. 268.

[33]Newton and Neil, p. 273.

[34]Rookmaaker, P. 90.

[35]Newton and Neil, p. 292

[36]Newton and Neil, p. 282.

[37]Newton and Neil, p. 296.

[38]John Canady, Embattled Critic, (Plainview, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972).

[39]Moore, p. 283.

[40]Newton and Neil, p. 288.

[41]Rookmaaker, p. 31.

[42]Rookmaaker, p. 75.

[43]Newton and Neil, p. 298.

[44]Jane Dillenberger, Secular Art with Sacred Themes, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 119.

[45]Dillenberger, p. 118.

[46]Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century, (New York: Jewish Museum, 1976), p. 45.

[47]Canaday, p. 59.

[48]Canaday, p. 60.

[49]Canaday, p. 61.

[50]Rookmaaker, p. 205.

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