

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE CHURCH AT ASSY AND MODERN SACRED ART is the subject of an illustrated lecture to be given by Professor William S. Rubin at The Museum of Modern Art on Wednesday, April 27, at 8:30 p.m. The lecture, co-sponsored by the Museum and the Foundation for the Arts, Religion and Culture, will be illustrated by slides of works by Bonnard, Chagall, Léger, Matisse and Rouault, among others.

Tickets are available at the Museum Information Desk and by mail from the Museum: Museum members, Foundation members, and students: \$1.50; non-members: \$2.

The church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce at Assy, France, was the first ambitious venture of the Dominican-led Sacred Art Movement under Father Marie-Alain Couturier. It represented, in Mr. Rubin's words, "a radical change in policy, through which the community of genuine artists, few of them Catholic and many of them actively opposed to religion, was invited to participate in the church."

Work on the church of Assy began in 1938 but was temporarily halted with the outbreak of World War II. Father Couturier took over its direction in 1940 and used the project as a practical laboratory to demonstrate the new theories of ecclesiastical art being explored by the Dominicans.

The radical aspect of the decorative plan for Assy was carried out between 1945 and 1950. During this period Georges Rouault designed five stained glass windows, Fernand Léger in 1945 executed a mosaic façade decoration and Jean Lurçat a tapestry for the sanctuary. The three windows in the tribune were created in 1946 by Jean Bazaine, who, except for Rouault, was the only practicing Catholic among the famous artists represented at Assy. In 1947 Jacques Lipchitz created a baptismal font and Marc Chagall decorated the baptistry with a ceramic mural. Henri Matisse made a ceramic tile work and Georges Braque offered a small relief for the door of the tabernacle in 1948. The decorative program was completed in 1950 when Germaine Richier was commissioned to do a bronze crucifix, and in that year the church at Assy was consecrated.

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Mr. Rubin believes that the revival of religious art which took place at Assy "depended upon a new, unorthodox, and tenuous alliance between the community of artists and a liberal minority within the Church.... The modern masters who worked at Assy in no way embraced the tenets of Catholicism. Nor did they surrender their almost universal distrust of institutional religion. They were, and remain, largely unfamiliar with the liturgy which sacred art celebrates. The subjects chosen by the Dominicans, particularly as they were revised to suit the participating artists, ... [were] handled so that...traditional meanings were altered or translated into purely personal philosophies."

Unfortunately, this policy was rejected by increasingly vocal elements within the Church who encouraged the Vatican to repress the new movement. Though Assy was followed by Matisse's chapel at Vence and Le Corbusier's church at Ronchamp, the movement -- in so far as it made a genuine attempt to incorporate great modern art in the Church -- lost its impetus. Assy remains unique; as Mr. Rubin says, "An undertaking of comparably great scale and meaning must wait upon the time when established religions recreate themselves as spiritual leaders of the artistic and intellectual world." The nature of religious art, the problems of enlisting leading modern artists in the service of the Church, and the acceptance of their art by ecclesiastical authorities and the community are still vital issues today.

William Rubin is a professor of art history at Hunter and Sarah Lawrence Colleges, as well as the author of the book Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy. He was formerly the American Editor of Art International magazine and is the author of a forthcoming book on dada and surrealist art.

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