

Gloom is No Longer Respectable

Some American Trends in Church Art

By CHARLES J. CONNICK

WHENEVER I TRY to visualize the typical American church of the early nineteenth century, I have a pleasant vision. Buildings, whether of brick or wood, were simple and dignified in their contours and in their restrained enrichment of doorways and belfries.

But it is the interior of such a structure that especially pleases me in relation to what happened later to dull and deaden the light of day for church worshippers. Windows divided into panes of blown glass, bubbled and textured, admitted a brilliant light which was controlled by inside shutters.

The designers and builders of early American meeting-houses were sensible—aesthetic, even—in their treatment of light. Interiors never become dull and deadly in a vitiated light. Even with the shutters almost closed in the path of brilliant sunlight, gay arrows and slivers of sparkling light dashed across floors and walls to enliven the wits of minister and listeners. While on gentle gray days, the light was admitted freely in all its gracious power.

For color, those early worshippers often depended upon a brilliant carpet of red or red-violet, and cushions of some related color—possibly a deep crimson.

It was rather late in the nineteenth century where the simple good taste of earlier days began to disintegrate with dire results. For money-makers discovered that even beautiful old meeting-houses offered opportunities to venturesome art-glass salesmen. Throughout New England and in New York, Pennsylvania, and many southern states, the picture window blight began by ruining the interiors of honest and handsome Colonial and Georgian churches.

Opalescent glass was made in pastel tints that could be handled easily enough without either talent or conviction. Glass was made for sky, for sheeps' backs, for foliage and grass. It was also pulled into chunks and ribs that served to give the effect of folds in drapery. All the glass was guaranteed to keep out the light, for it was opaque with the milky whiteness of what glass-makers call "opal." Hence the very attractive name, "Opalescent Glass."

A German by the name of Plock-

horst had painted from a good-looking model, draped in flowing raiment, a picture he called "The Good Shepherd." That picture was copied everywhere, became a prize Sunday school card, printed in crude colors, which fell into the hands of the Art Glass Industry's practitioners.

So it was that the spirited Parable of The Lost Sheep and the related allegory of The Good Shepherd were reduced to a mawkish sentimental symbol in American church art. No socially inclined historian who appreciates the importance of beauty and sincerity in God's house has ever tried

The author, a distinguished artist in stained glass, places the blame for our dingy churches, inherited from the late nineteenth century, on the fact that "money-makers discovered that even beautiful old meeting-houses offered opportunities to venturesome art-glass salesmen".

to estimate the influence of sickly insincerity in the church art of America so far as I know. But such a subject should not be neglected, and I am always hoping that some wise philosopher and clear-eyed critic, like Lewis Mumford or Eric Gill, may be inspired to search out the spiritual values that were outraged, if not destroyed, by the soft prettiness of the popular Good Shepherd and the avalanche of opaque picture windows that followed in its wake.

For, whether we like the idea or not, all of us who love the beauty of God's house, must admit that an interior is dominated by what happens in the path of its light—and, worst of all—what happens when its light of day is sicklied o'er with pale and pretty opaque windows that function like curtains.

The darkness and dullness of churches and church schools that resulted from opaque windows may have inspired a remarkable poem that was published in a small Pittsburgh week-ly in the eighteen-eighties:

*We gathered in that dull close room
With ignominious thoughts and small*

*And something held us there in thrall
Like to the bondage of a tomb,
We quite forgot the wide,
The pleasant land outside.*

Those were the days when gloom was respectable and when artists and architects submerged their color schemes in heavy tonalities. Even the importations from Europe were touched with gloom. Over-painted stained glass windows shut out almost as much light as did the heavier opalescent creations of the American art glass men. Furniture and walls were most often dark and solemn, although sometimes they were tinted in soft colors that could not offend the fastidious folk who looked upon pure color as most irritatingly vulgar.

Of course I smile as I use the American picture window as a symbol of all that happened in church art during the seventies, eighties and nineties.

At the same time, I offer no apologies, for stained glass has been most aptly termed "The Handmaid of Architecture." So I can be respectful to that great profession while I leave space between these lines for the assumption that when the craft stained glass fell into evil ways, Dame Architecture had led the way.

In the next breath, it should also be said that Dame Architecture, it was, who turned over a new leaf. That story is a most dramatic one, and again I pause to wonder why writers on social and aesthetic subjects have rarely noticed it.

A zealous young architect who had built a lofty Gothic edifice in memory of a distinguished American, was dumbfounded to see what happened to the chancel window. It blossomed forth into a great opaque landscape picture art glass window while he was dreaming of a lovely expression in light and color that would bring forth the glory that was the stained glass craft of earlier days.

That young architect, whose name, by the way, was Cram, had convictions, strength of character, and a wonderful vocabulary. What he said about that picture window and about debased art in general, rattled the rafters of commercial leaders in church art everywhere, especially in the art glass industry.

Though it was done in a somewhat violent fashion, yet it was certainly true that Ralph Adams Cram, with his friends and followers, ushered in the light of day, and with it a suggestion that the Golden Rule may work in the field we call church art, as well as elsewhere.

Beginning with the church school, we now have an idea that the honest and good things in the art world of symbolism and allegory, can serve us all beautifully from our youngest days. Through the early gropings of Chris-

tian symbolists in the catacombs—through Byzantine, Gothic and early Renaissance to our own honest men who love God and do as they please, we are being encouraged. So that now we can repeat happily the last verse of that good poem of the eighteen-eighties:

*And all the while that we were there
Beholden to that narrow place,
The sun rode on in open space,
And songs of gladness filled the air,
And God with His good will
Around us waited still.*