

What Does Color Mean to You?

By CHARLES J. CONNICK

Editor's Note.—The writer of this article is one of America's authorities on stained glass. He gives us here an interesting discussion on the use of color in Christian art. Do you know what color means in the decorative scheme of our Christian churches? If not, these pages will open up a new world of interpretation for your thought and imagination.

COLOR surrounds us in our workaday world. It has messages for us as powerful as it had for lovers of color in the days when pure color had a symbolic language that served as an accompaniment to music and pageantry in church worship.

Nowadays the meaning of color, as we know it in traffic signals or in dancing electric signs, calls for an interpretation somewhat different from the one Dante implied in *The Divine Comedy*. And yet Dante and his fellow artists, who thought that color in all its beauty and eloquence was the handmaid of Christianity, would have some understanding of the color that flashes around us today.

Dante would certainly recognize, for example, the terrific power of red that shrieks at us in raucous color combinations from wayside signs during the

THE theme of each of the five chancel windows in the Heinz Memorial Chapel, Pittsburgh, is developed through growing forms in significant details to suggest the parables of the Vine and its related symbol, the Tree of Life. The subject of each window is announced in its own key color.

The center chancel window is the first to greet one upon entering the chapel. With its warm red it extends a welcome and proclaims the dominant theme of the entire chapel, Charity, set forth in the figures of The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son. The left-center window, symbolizing The Good Shepherd and The Sower, has for its key color white, for Faith; and the right-center window, with dominating figures of Hope, has its key color green, with Christ Transfigured and Christ the Light of the World.

The left chancel window with dominating figures of Justice, Christ as the Wise Judge, and Christ as the Householder, has the key color violet, uniting the red of charity and the blue of wisdom to symbolize Justice.

The right chancel window—The Wisdom Window, has for its dominating figures Christ in his discourse with the woman of Samaria and Nicodemus. The key color is the pure blue of divine Wisdom.

In the days when Christian art was at its height stained glass windows carried an emotional appeal. Pure colors in themselves were symbols of spiritual qualities, and when set forth in great windows, expressed thoughts and feelings beyond the reach of words.

The artist who sings in the color and light of stained glass, like the composer who thrills with music, longs to stir emotional qualities that reach beyond words and labels into the very soul.

day, and from even more restless and compelling electric signs at night. I like to think that his sense of aesthetic values would serve him well here and now, even though the clamorous color of our day should challenge his concepts of what it ought to do for us.

The medieval idea of color as a bearer of lofty messages, full of implications beyond the reach of words, may well remind us of conclusions expressed by thoughtful physicians and psychologists when they seek to discover why we have so many battered minds in our midst today. We hear, for example, that deranged minds are soothed by blues and cool colors while they are irritated by reds and the warm areas of the spectrum. Equally impressive are news items from clinics and hospitals recording experiments with color in efforts to keep minds healthy and to cure sick minds by cool and restful color areas throughout whole rooms—whole buildings even.

Following such implications, Eugene Field's lively line, "Any color so it's red," might be set to jittery music to serve as our very special theme song so long as we keep away from hospitals. For as red is the color most obviously effective at a glance, of course it is the color most strenuously ex-

ploited by those who want to sell something or other to everybody everywhere. They are not interested in hospitals.

Whatever advertisers' intentions may be, color has its own way of influencing us, whether we realize it or not. The power of our high-pitched color today may reach further, for better or worse, than the region where aesthetic values are pondered over and written about. For its force is not subdued by rules of taste.

Fortunately, in the great outdoors, color does not exist in a vacuum. Brother Sun, Sister Rain, and all weathers have a way of flouting the most sustained efforts at purposeful ugliness under the open sky, even when huge quotas of electric power have been commandeered to strengthen those efforts. Who has not noticed at dawn of a sunny morning the puny effort of gigantic signs and their elaborate framework? Or who has failed to catch an almost startling transformation on some street at night when a city is suddenly captured by mist and rain or swirling snow? It would be interesting to know just what kind of weather served as a setting for Broadway's electric signs when a distinguished visitor exclaimed: "How beautiful, if only one couldn't read!" Ah, there's the rub! Even through cooling mists and jeweled raindrops the purposeful urge of those dancing fanfares is never quite lost. We're not allowed to forget for long the aggressive salesmanship that has taken the hot, arresting areas of the spectrum to set forth a color symbolism that cannot be denied.

So it is not strange that some such ideas have invaded the church, its art and architecture. Congregations and clergymen are urged to go to sunsets for color schemes. In the next breath they are rebuked for making too ritzy the interiors of churches that a well-known psychologist has said are only factories made to turn out a worthy product. My indignant protests against standardized sunset color schemes and against confusing churches with factories are influenced by countless American churches that I know. Many of them clearly record healthy and generous impulses related to grand old traditions of beauty in God's house. But far too many cannot stand any challenging criticism of their beauty or

functional usefulness. What can be said for churches that are ugly and even pretentiously weak and silly? The worst of them are pathetic reminders of a great twelfth century church builder's wise remark. The Abbé Suger of Saint Denis, exalted leader of church and state, gave the secret of what we call good taste in the rugged fashion of an honest workman who knew his stuff: "Our poor spirit is so weak that it is only through the use of materials that it can rise to the truth."

I know of no better expression to suggest that through our close association with materials, as workers in them, we just naturally imbibe the qualities of those materials. When we work in stone, we have a sense of enduring qualities to symbolize rectitude and patience, substantial and thoroughgoing, yet often touched with ineffable grace. When we work in iron, or bronze, or brass, we have a different consciousness, related to an endurance under pressure.

So it is with all materials and their fields of usefulness. So it is with stout, trustworthy modern materials. But what about the flimsy, the ineffectual, showy makeshifts that spill over into worthy structures through the influence of advertisers and exploiters?



Kope - Green

And what are we to say about the same forces when they appear in the guise of adornment and enrichment of church interiors?

We can be very sure of one thing. If good people took the trouble to learn the qualities and characteristics of materials and colors they use, we would have much less tawdry prettiness, or stark ugliness around us anywhere.

I never liked the idea of separating, in any academic fashion, a church interior from the flowing forces that are around us all the time. I would not crystallize into terms such as "Christian Art" or "Sacred Art" the real distinctions that should be made when we think of heartening and beautiful services in praise and prayer to worship the spirit that *giveth light in dark places*.

There is a real enlightenment in the expression "all sincere art is Christian art" and I often marvel that lovers of beauty in the church fail to invite their community artists and architects, poets and newspapermen, to contribute in their own way to the power and beauty of a church and its influence. For, to me, all such contributions come under the head of color. I am often compelled to see and to be a part of well-intentioned groups of people closely related to church activities who seem to lack that quality of personality that we call "color." So it is not strange that many church interiors lack the same color in their physical makeup.

What I really should plead, if I were licensed to preach, is for more color everywhere—inside and outside—but especially, and first of all, inside ourselves, inside our dwelling places, and inside our churches.

The language of color is known to everyone, at least in what we might call some of its dialects, and since its more powerful and active areas have been pretty well utilized by advertisers and money-makers, should not we, just naturally, study the neglected end of the palette, the cooler, quieter, and deeper hues? For that matter, should not we become acquainted with all of them, and if we are to have color in our churches, should not we have ideas, aspirations, and inspirations in spiritual regions comparable to the regions we associate with beautiful color?

Think of the poets—of Dante, first of all, who might be called the prismatic colorist in poetry, because every color was, to him, alive in relation to every other color as well as in relation to spiritual qualities.

So when we say that Dante's favorite color was the brilliant orange vermilion that was called red in the Middle Ages, we have to remember also that every color was in his vision when he made such a choice, and that he never

seemed to see color in a vacuum.

There were many times when blue, "the color of the sweet air," seemed to be his favorite color. Other times green, gold, even violet. So I like to call Dante the spreader of rainbows, *the spiritual patron saint of the stained glass craft*. Such thoughts also relate themselves to the great poets of the Old Testament. Have you ever thought how significant are the references to color throughout the Bible?

It was no accident that, at a time when men were sincerely stirred by the spirit of worship, they used materials in a way that still helps us "to rise to the truth." Nor is it any wonder that the loveliest and most gloriously eloquent of all those materials should be the little handmaid of architecture, stained glass.

We all shared in such thoughts as we worked day after day and month after month on the group of windows in the Heinz Memorial Chapel of the University of Pittsburgh. There was an opportunity given us by a donor who made us feel that he liked and trusted us, and that what we, in our hearts, wanted to enrich the beautiful dream he also wanted, even though he could not at first share all our visions.

Therefore, I know that our continued delight and pleasure in the designing and making of those windows followed the same spiritual laws that we wanted to celebrate throughout the soaring great windows of that edifice.

We began with the five chancel windows related to each other in quiet angles of a beautifully designed apse. That relationship, as I thought and dreamed about it, encouraged me to make a daring experiment.

"Why not," I said to myself, "make those windows, which are the keys to the spirit of the interior, heralds of the five beautiful virtues in the traditional colors of those spiritual qualities?"

So that daring experiment was brought to its final fruition, and the windows now—especially the central three, Faith, Love, and Hope—sing out a welcome in white, orange-red, and green to all who enter that chapel door. As they near the chancel, they become aware of a blue window on the right, the symbol of Wisdom, and a purple window on the left, the window dedicated to Justice, for purple (or violet) combines the color of Love and

the color of Wisdom, so to symbolize true Justice.

The central window, which is the first one seen, is a beautiful, radiant spectrum red, in a setting of blues, whites, and golds that also form, in varying hues, the settings for dominant colors in the other windows.

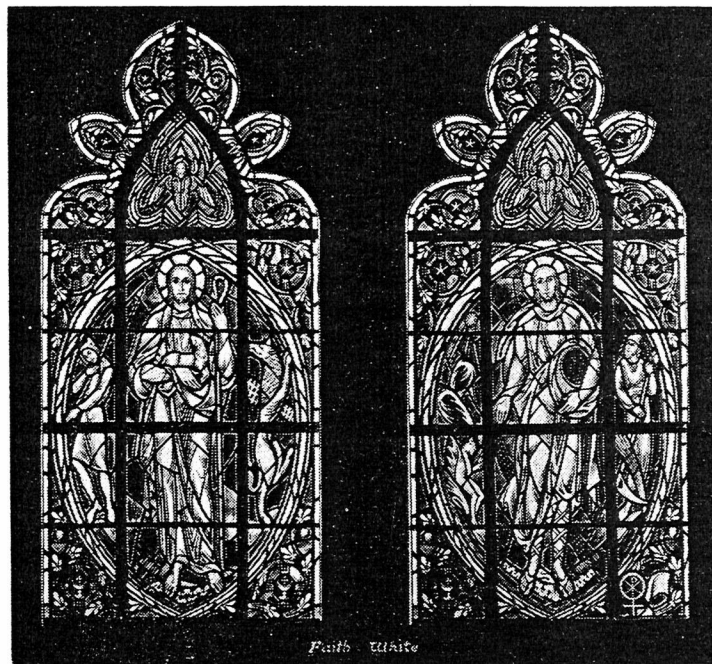
Whenever I think of brotherly love my mind always leaps to the wonderful stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. So those two figures, larger than any others in the chancel windows, dominate the group, and serve, with accessory figures symbolizing the same ideas, to peal forth a welcome that everyone seems to accept with shining eyes.

So it is with a profound feeling of gratitude that I recall the thrilling experience that was mine when I first entered the chapel with a fresh eye after all the windows were properly placed.

I am grateful, also, to my wife, who quoted to me these words from Isaiah 54. 11-13:

"O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.

"And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles,



and all thy borders of pleasant stones.

"And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children."

As one learns to listen to great music, so one learns to watch windows and to gather through changing hours, days, and seasons intimations and implications of virtues and trials that exalt spiritual values in a living, symphonic pageantry.

Hosea, First Prophet of Grace

Continued from page 179) free scholarships. He who touches the book of Hosea touches a man.

Only by measuring things with an inch tape can he ever be called a minor prophet. While there is grace, suggests Hosea, there is hope. His gracious and hope-filled thought of God is fulfilled in the teaching of Jesus. It is because Christianity is a religion of grace that it is a religion of hope, able to sow its seed and reap its harvests in stony and sterile fields.

It is the Christian religion that is bringing hope to the outcastes of India; it is that same religion that has won its greatest triumphs in most difficult and hopeless times and places. Christianity can make no truce with depression or with despair. Christ is the sworn foe of both. Neither is of his spirit. Christianity set hope in the forefront of the virtues. It is no optional or accidental thing.

The Bible is the book of hope. The God revealed there is a God of hope, which is more than could be said of Buddha or of Confucius. One of God's supreme tasks is to introduce new hope into apparently hopeless situations, to make it possible for us to face the disappointments and the disciplines of life in a brave and hopeful spirit. "He only is a believer," it has been said, "who lives by his belief." Those who believe in a God of hope should be children of hope.

"And, . . . sweet music
breathe
Above, about, or under-
neath,
Sent by some spirit to
mortals good,
Or the unseen genius of
the wood.
But let my due feet
never fail
To walk the studious
cloister's pale,
And love the high em-
bowed roof,
With antique pillars

massy-proof,
and storied windows richly dight,
giving a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow,
To the full-voiced quire below,
In service high and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through mine
ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes."
—From "Il Penseroso," by John Milton.



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