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**FATHER MARIE-ALAIN COUTURIER
AND THE SACRED ART MOVEMENT**

by

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**dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
The City University of New York.**

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Dedicated to my parents, Richard and Lillian

And

For Jay, Claire and Mike

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
1. Purpose	2
2. Problem	3
3. Methodology	8
 CHAPTER I: A Synopsis of Church Art Prior to Couturier	 14
1. History of Church Art	14
2. Modern Society, Modern Art, and Couturier's Dilemma	22
 CHAPTER II: Father Marie-Alain Couturier	 28
1. Father Marie-Alain Couturier	28
2. The State of Affairs Leading up to 1939	31
3. Art Workshops	34
4. Theological Leanings	47
5. Philosophical Readings	50
 CHAPTER III: Couturier in America	 59
1. Couturier in America	59
2. The Catholic Church in America	69

CHAPTER III: Couturier in America (continued)	
3. The Liturgical Arts Society	73
4. The American Art World	79
5. Intellectual Life	95
 CHAPTER IV: The Church at Assy	 116
1. The Sacred Art Movement	117
2. The Church at Assy	119
3. The Artworks at Assy	125
4. The Controversy at Assy	149
5. Conclusion	168
 CONCLUSION	 181
 ILLUSTRATIONS	 189
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 216

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1	Father Marie-Alain Couturier. Photograph. Couturier Collection	189
2	<i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Plateau d'Assy. Guillet-Lescuyer Photographer	190
3	<i>Miriam</i> , Mosaic Façade. Fernand Léger, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	191
4	<i>Floorplan</i> , <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i>	192
5	<i>Miriam Medallion</i> , Detail. Léger, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	193
6	<i>Gallery Woodcarvings</i> , Demaison. <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	194
7	<i>Apocalypse Tapestry</i> , Jean Lurçat, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	195
8	<i>St. Dominic</i> , Mosaic. Henri Matisse, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	196
9	<i>Tabernacle Door</i> , Bronze. Georges Braque, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	197
10	<i>St. Frances of Sales</i> , Oil. Pierre Bonnard, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	198
11	<i>Seated Christ</i> , Stained Glass. Georges Rouault, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	199
12	<i>Chastised Christ</i> , Stained Glass. Georges Rouault, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	200
13	<i>Flowers</i> , Stained Glass. Georges Rouault, <i>Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce</i> , Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	201

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS (continued)

Figure		Page
14	<i>Flowers</i> , Stained Glass, Georges Rouault, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	202
15	<i>Veronique</i> , Stained Glass, Georges Rouault, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	203
16	<i>Devotional Cards</i> , Marie-Alain Couturier, Convento S. Sabina	204
17	<i>Saint Raphael</i> , Stained Glass, Couturier, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	205
18	<i>Saint Thérèse of Lisieux</i> , Stained Glass, Couturier, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	206
19	<i>King David</i> , Stained Glass, Jean Bazaine, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	207
20	<i>The Madonna and the Spirit</i> , Bronze, Jacques Lipchitz, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	208
21	<i>Moses Crossing the Red Sea</i> , Tile, Marc Chagall, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	209
22	<i>Bas Relief</i> , Marble, Marc Chagall, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	210
23	<i>Stained Glass Window</i> , Marc Chagall, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	211
24	<i>Don Quijote</i> , Bronze, Germaine Richier, Private Collection	212
25	<i>Crucifixion</i> , Bronze, Germaine Richier, Nôtre Dame De Toute Grâce, Guillet-Lescuyer, Photographer	213
26	<i>The Crucifixion</i> , Oil, Mathias Grünewald, Musée d'Unterlinder	214
27	<i>Crucifixion</i> , Oil, Thomas Eakins, Philadelphia Museum of Art	215

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on a relatively obscure priest/artist whose thought and work had a profound influence on the course of sacred art in the twentieth century. This individual was born Pierre Couturier in 1897 at Montbrison in central France to a prosperous, cultured Catholic family. He began his formal art training in 1919 in Paris at one of the Beaux-Arts schools, *Académie de la Grande Chaumière*, but later that year was admitted to the art program at the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*, the workshop headed by Maurice Denis and George Desvallières. It was at the *Ateliers* that Couturier was personally introduced to the idea of a Christian art revival. The program with Denis and Desvallières at the *Ateliers* aimed to form a group of "Christians that do great art."

Couturier studied five years at the *Ateliers*. At this point in his life he held two beliefs about sacred art. First, he believed that an artist did not normally divorce his work from his spiritual values. This implied, of course, that an artist commissioned to produce art for a church must embrace the belief of that church. Couturier's second belief was that abstract art could not be religious art. He believed that purely abstract forms could not embody the spirituality required for church art. Of course these ideas were hardly original with Couturier. Indeed, these were the views of the Church and of the artists who produced art for the Church. But Couturier's beliefs were to change radically. Many years later he abandoned both of these beliefs and put his new and radical beliefs about sacred art into practice in the selection of art for a new church in the small French

town of Assy. This dissertation focuses on how that change came about and the milieu in the art world that made it possible.

After his ordination as a Catholic priest in 1930, Pierre Couturier became Father Marie-Alain Couturier. He eventually came to believe that only modern art, specifically abstract forms, could revitalize the Church. It is the thesis of this dissertation that the changes in Couturier's aesthetic philosophy and his subsequent use of abstract forms were a result of his exile years in America (1939-1945), years that proved to be influential in the final formation of his aesthetic theories. Robert Schwartzwald, French professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who also has a great interest in Couturier, states that "it was Couturier's change of position on the question of abstract art that is the most remarkable aspect of his exile."¹ Couturier's interactions with artists and intellectuals and his close relations with émigrés in America provided the opportunity and the material for a reconsideration of his previous position on abstract art.² When Couturier returned to France after the war, he implemented his newfound aesthetic theories in selecting artwork for a new church in Assy, a pilgrimage site in the Haute Savoie. The works placed in the church at Assy represent a radical departure from Catholic tradition, and those works and writings about them will be examined as the best evidence of the theories Couturier developed while in America.

Purpose

This dissertation seeks to explain Father Couturier's motivation behind his efforts to revitalize the Church through its use of art. Joanna Weber, Director of the Couturier Collection at Yale University, says, "He saw his vocation as nothing less than the total

revitalization of the Church through its art forms.”³ Like Kandinsky and Mondrian before him, Couturier was convinced of the utopian power of art to influence and change a troubled and chaotic society.

Couturier’s adoption of a new theory regarding sacred art and his implementation of that new theory at Assy had important ramifications for the Catholic Church. As we follow the development of his aesthetic theories in the context of the prevailing milieu of the day, we *will live through*⁴ his efforts to reconcile disparate topics like tradition and modernism, collectivism and individualism, form and content, and the sacred and the profane. Concern with these subjects threatened the conservative faction of the Church and revealed the Church’s instability and declining authority in a changing modern world. Yet Couturier saw struggling with these issues as the essential spark that could invigorate the Church.

Problem

Couturier has been described as “an original multifaceted thinker who ... was influential in furthering within Roman Catholicism a positive dialogue with modern art.”⁵ In light of the Church’s powerful history and its declining ability to respond convincingly to the spiritual needs of modern society,⁶ Father Couturier was convinced that the Church’s power and authority could be revitalized through a change in church art policies. He described church art as being “...in a state of decay, dusty, academic, imitative, ...with no power to speak to modern man.”⁷ Couturier called for a church art using modern forms because contemporary art forms better reflected the current times and thus had the power to speak to contemporary man. Hence, modern art forms were

the most appropriate forms for liturgical or religious purposes. This was a revolutionary thought.

The traditional idea that an artwork could be divided into its form and its meaning was generally accepted. These two categories were considered distinct and separate: meaning could be obtained from a work of art, and a work of art could be appreciated for its form through its colors, lines, textures, and the ways in which these things are combined. Studying the random splatters of color, the openness of the composition, its contrasts of light and dark, its complex patterns could be a satisfactory way of appreciating art. It is this paper's contention that, initially, Couturier had visualized art through these two categories. But the Biblical monistic view of the person in which the mind and the body are inseparable and the Catholic interest in incarnation and transubstantiation with the prominence of religious relics in liturgy allowed him to view the prevailing modernist artistic tendencies in a new light. Hence, the two traditional categories, form and meaning, were collapsed into one. Form became meaning for Couturier. Meaning was not some conditional and detachable element of the work: separation of form and content was impossible. Norman Bryson discusses the relationship between form and experience, and in this case, specifically between form (programmed content) and devotional experience:

For the Catholic Church, the image is the crucial instrument for galvanizing the soul's force and communicating its liturgical programs and teachings. The transcendence ... of God is not an intellectual concept, but primarily a sensory experience. The image objectifies that which is "irrational"...Image and liturgy fuse together. ...vision has direct access to things of the spirit.⁸

These new forms as symbols of the culture supplanted traditional forms. By looking at symbols of culture, Couturier and the viewer, like the artist, recreated new, more complete meanings for life.

Chapter I examines the history of church art in order to provide a context to understand the degree to which Couturier's art selections at Assy diverge from tradition. This chapter contains a discussion of the historical policy and purpose of art in churches in France, noting the Catholic Church's preference for certain art styles and its stand on the appropriateness of modern art forms in a religious context. Although artistic academicism was reinforced when the Council of Trent's ruling in 1545-63 advocated a "...theological conformism - (including) pious, social, intellectual - that led to (a corresponding) artistic conformism,"⁹ the Catholic Church was no stranger to the 'political' use of art and visual display.

Chapter II turns to Couturier himself, chronicling his development as a priest and artist against the backdrop of religious art history dealt with in Chapter I. When we turn to the times in which Couturier lived, we see that three major traditional institutions were losing their coherence - the family, society, and the government. This was an opportune time for the Church to assume a position of leadership. But instead the Church clung to imagery that was no longer relevant to the existing society. During a time when strong decisive leadership was longed for, the Church perpetuated through its existing art an image of the humble patient follower. What was needed instead were art forms that projected the Church as strong and decisive.

In Chapter III, Couturier's exile in America is examined. This is the pivotal portion of the current work because it was in the crucible of wartime America that

Couturier's thinking about sacred art changed, a change that was to manifest itself in the Church at Assy after Couturier's return to France. The intellectual and artistic climate of America, and particularly of New York, led to his eventual adoption of abstract art as appropriate for sacred purposes, a view that would have been anathema to him only a few years before.

Chapter IV examines how Couturier brought the liberation and creativity of abstract art to the Church at Assy. Among the works he commissioned, particular emphasis is given to the crucifix by Germaine Richier. The Church hierarchy denounced Richier's work as a "...scandalous and anti-Christian thing."¹⁰ Yet Richier's *Crucifixion* was *relevant* to the times because it visually captured the fears and feelings of the community.¹¹ If the Church had accepted Richier's work, the Church could have shown that it understood human suffering and the horrors of World War II. The Church would have demonstrated its accessibility through the *Crucifixion*; it would have reached out to the people and become alive. Instead, the Church held fast to its traditional beliefs and maintained the conservative role it had played during the war.

In the conclusion, the controversy at Assy is shown to be a turning point in twentieth century sacred art. Whereas traditional church art had always reinforced doctrine, modern art encouraged the worshipper in new and uncertain directions. Richier's image of Christ, while highly spiritual, did not necessarily reinforce Church doctrine. Indeed, it was read by many as a body victimized by Nazism. Given the Church's acquiescence during the war, the Richier *Crucifixion* was a double embarrassment to the Church.

For the purposes of this study, sacred art in the Catholic Church in France can be divided into pre- and post-World War II periods. It was between these two periods, during the war itself, that Couturier's exile years in America changed the development of his art theories. What Couturier saw and did in America encouraged his acceptance of abstract forms. It is my contention that the "when" and the "where" of his exile are inextricably intertwined; to understand Couturier's thinking on art, one must consider this question: "What makes his exile in America unique for his artistic development?" Granger Ryan – priest, scholar and friend of Couturier - says of him, "in 1939 ... he was still a prisoner of habits, constraints, of prohibitions and misunderstandings. America was to release him from those restraints."¹² An examination of the artistic, social and political dynamics during Couturier's American exile will reveal their influence on his eventual acceptance of the abstract form as appropriate for liturgical purposes and on his belief that modern forms could rejuvenate the Catholic Church.

According to Schwartzwald, "...while in North America, Father Couturier began to favor abstraction as the highest contemporary expression of spirituality in art..."¹³ Like a savvy art-world insider, Couturier had taken advantage of the climate of diversity in America, shuttling back and forth between the secular and the sacred, leading him to question the usefulness of many of his previously held categories. He developed strong ties with an intellectual group of fellow exiled artists, philosophers, and art dealers in America,¹⁴ sharing in a public interactive communication that was much in character with his Dominican Order. The Dominican Order was generally seen as a socially-minded order of priests. Influenced by America's struggle to define its own artistic identity, Couturier's art theories became more inclusive, accessible, and populist. The last part of

this study will look at a specific application of Couturier's aesthetic theories that were nurtured and developed during his exile years. The discussion will focus on the Church at Assy, his first comprehensive project of art decoration after World War II.

Method

It is the object of this project to understand the role of the Church in twentieth century France and to highlight themes in Couturier's thinking that help us to understand the logic of his aesthetic theories that ultimately favored abstract art "...as the highest contemporary expression of spirituality in art."¹⁵ and not to impose an unwarranted theoretical unity on Father Couturier's work. It has been charged that the twentieth century lacked a belief in an overarching metaphysical or moral development of reason, nationhood, or progress that was so important to nineteenth century historians. Instead, historians of the twentieth century sought meaning from the paradigmatic, the detail, the biography or memoir, and other incidental materials and documentation.

...the transient stimuli from readings, observations, chance meetings or conversations, nostalgic memories of childhood stirred Couturier the most during the fourteen years of his life which were marked first by his Exile [in America], then upon his return to France, and the battles he waged to bring contemporary art into religious buildings. These thoughts reflect his passionate interest in every surge of spirituality, wondering reaction to beauty, his observation of a world that was crumbling and his forecast of a new civilization.¹⁶

Walter Benjamin and his followers argued that value and meaning were to be found in the shard, the fragment and the wreckage, and not in the great constructions. As

Benjamin puts it, "...the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life [*i.e.*, *ticket-stubs, spools of cotton, cigarette stubs*] says more than [*the*] painting."¹⁷

Craig Owens wrote of Benjamin and his use of allegory as a mode of artistic signification: "Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete ... its most comprehensive expression in the ruin..."¹⁸ The theorist and cultural commentator, Siegfried Kracauer, a contemporary of Benjamin, also looked to the marginal areas of life as the key to understanding the underlying determinations of reality: "... the very unconscious nature of surface manifestations allows for direct access to the underlying meaning of existing conditions."¹⁹

But increasing globalization intuitively nudged society back towards a world-view, towards an understanding beyond the chronology of recurrent events. It was within this dialectical atmosphere that Couturier worked out his aesthetic theories, starting with the immediate issues of art and religion, but setting his sights beyond the present and driving towards the greater philosophical and political scene.

Without forcing the congruences too strongly, I will point out developments in secular and ecclesiastical politics, philosophy, and art, demonstrating their pervasive multiplicity. Sacred and secular intellectual developments will be seen to have followed parallel courses. References will be made to the social, ecclesiastical, and cultural discourses in America and France within the designated exile years, including - but not limited to - Henri Focillon's *Vie des Formes*.²⁰ Jacques Maritain's theories on the social and political responsibilities of art and religion, and the Catholic Church's views.

Henri Focillon, a twentieth century French art historian whose book Couturier read en route to America, taught at Yale during the war years. When Focillon died in

1943, Couturier spoke at the memorial at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he described Focillon as “his old friend.”²¹

Maritain’s arguments on faith, art, and religion affected and modified Couturier’s views on a reconciliation of art and religion. Princeton University holds many of Maritain’s writings and lectures. This religious theologian taught there during the war years and was Couturier’s personal friend. In addition to Maritain, Sartre and other existentialists gained popular acceptance.

Central to the scholarship to date is a dissertation by Mark Wedig, an artist and Dominican priest, who discussed Couturier’s aesthetic theories as published in *L’Art Sacré*. Wedig stressed the relationship between the artistic and the Dominican religious avant-garde, showing how the modernist issues of genius and form could be compatible with both artistic and religious thought. These modernist issues will also be discussed in this paper, but mainly within the context of Couturier’s 1939-45 exile in North America. No one has studied Couturier’s activities in the United States.

Another important secondary source, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church at Assy* (1961), is based on William Rubin’s doctoral dissertation. It offers an excellent discussion of the works commissioned at Assy, culminating with the controversial *Crucifixion* by Germaine Richier.

This dissertation will analyze and compare the philosophical underpinnings of the art at Assy in order to address issues precipitated by Couturier’s struggle with the Catholic Church over modern abstract art. Scholars consulted and/or cited include Stephen Happel of Catholic University, Robert Schwartzwald of the University of Massachusetts, John Haletsky previously of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and John

Cook of the Yale School of Theology and the Henry Luce Foundation. Two people who maintained a personal friendship with Couturier in France and in America were Father Granger Ryan of The School of Sacred Art and Music at Yale and Dominique de Menil, founder of the de Menil Foundation in Houston and the Couturier Collection at Yale.

Of course the most important material for this subject is Couturier's own writing. His works include articles for *L'Art Sacré* (1936-39 and 1950-54), selected comments and criticisms in *Art Sacré*, lectures published in *Art et catholicisme*, random personal notes entitled *Chroniques*, and informal diary entries in *Se Garder Libre: Journal*, 1947-1954. Significant archival material is housed at Yale. Of particular interest are Couturier's sermons, diaries, and letters written prior to, during, and after his stay in America. These unpublished materials offer valuable insight into the intellectual milieu of the exiled artists, philosophers, and priest whose ties strengthened during their stay in America. The primary basis of this project, therefore, is a careful reading of Couturier's diary entries, correspondences, articles and books.

Endnotes

1. Robert Schwartzwald, "The 'Civic Presence' of Father Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P. in Quebec," (Yale U: Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, n.d.,) 3.
2. Schwartzwald 24.
3. Joanna Weber, Director of Couturier Collection and former Menil Scholar (1987-89), *PRISM* Oct 1993: 1. Hereinafter cited as *PRISM*.
4. It was Couturier's belief that events, whether of a religious or artistic nature, were only meaningful if one experienced them personally. As one lives through the experience, that experience is regenerated anew and made alive; hence the importance of living through experiences.
5. Thomas O'Meara, "Modern Art and the Sacred: The Prophetic Ministry of Alain Couturier O.P.," *Spirituality Today* Spring, 1986: 32.
6. Schwartzwald 2.
7. Alain Marie Couturier, unpublished diaries, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University, box 49. Hereinafter cited as "unpublished diaries." The dates will be shown when they were on the original document. Many of these entries were undated.
8. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990) 119.
9. William Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1961) 8.
10. Monseigneur Touzé, "Le Christ dans le bainlieu," *L'Art Sacré*, 18th year, 8 (1951): 3.
11. The Church at Assy was located in the mountain area dedicated to convalescing patients from several local sanatoria. It was prescribed for patients afflicted with lung diseases, and was similar to the region described in Thomas Mann's book *Magic Mountain*. The fear of protracted health problems, suffering and even death were present.
12. Granger Ryan Archives, Seton Hill College (Greenburg, PA). Made available on line (maura.setonhill.edu/~archives/ryan.narr.html). William Granger Ryan was an American priest and former Research Scholar at the Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University who translated many of Couturier's works and worked closely with subsequent Couturier scholars. He was influential in locating the Couturier Collection at Yale where he later taught. He died in 1997.
13. Schwartzwald 3.
14. Schwartzwald 24.
15. Schwartzwald 3.
16. Marcel Billot, unpublished notes on his presentation at a Rothko symposium (1-3 Dec. 1989), Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University. Billot is the curator of the first Couturier Collection in Paris.
17. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 486.

18. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 1054.
19. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 462.
20. Henri Focillon, *Vies des Formes*, trans. C. B. Hogan and G. Kublier (New Haven: Yale UP, 1942). Focillon was born in 1881 and died in New Haven in 1943. He was an art historian and a professor at Sorbonne, College de France, and Yale. Couturier spoke at the memorial for Focillon at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he described Focillon as "his old friend."
21. Couturier, unpublished diaries.

CHAPTER I

A Synopsis of Church Art Prior to Couturier

In order to appreciate the importance of Father Couturier's art choices for the Church at Assy, it is necessary to understand how significantly those works diverge from Catholic tradition. This chapter will lay the groundwork for that understanding with a brief survey of the history of art in the Church.

Historically, the Church has dealt with art in a fragmented fashion. There is little evidence of a well-planned and unified approach. There are few rulings concerning art *per se*, and like most Vatican dictates, the artistic rulings were exclusive rather than inclusive. Those few rulings dealing specifically with art have not been motivated by purely artistic issues. Instead, Church rulings appear to be reactions to political and ecclesiastical events, efforts to maintain the status quo, or attempts to retain its relationship with the government. They do not seem motivated by a desire to further the development of sacred art.

Canon Law 1279 is the oldest and most important ruling concerning art.¹ It dates from the eighth century and resulted from a political struggle between the Church and the Isaurian Emperor, Leo III, who had issued an imperial prohibition in 726 AD against the practice of honoring saints. He ordered all images of saints removed from churches, an act that was condemned by the Pope. The 2nd Nicene Council (787 AD) was convened, in part, to deal with the Emperor's prohibition, and the Church did succeed in restoring the images of saints to the churches; the ban was lifted in 843 AD. As part of this

restoration, the Council dictated the appropriate nature of images used in churches. Canon Law 1279 states that every sacred image must reflect “due decency and respectability, with decency referring to the esthetic and material formulation and respectability to the morality of the image qua image.”² It condemns “unusual images...not in conformity with the approved usage of the Church” or those which “represent a false dogma...or which would be an occasion of dangerous error to the unlearned.”³ Thus was established the tradition of the Church setting requirements for proper sacred art.

The next thoroughgoing and significant examination of sacred art by the Church occurred in the sixteenth century, approximately seven hundred and fifty years after the 2nd Nicene Council, and it was again prompted by outside forces, in this case the Reformation. The Reformation questioned the Church’s authority and led to a considerable loss of its influence in both the spiritual and the political realms. As part of its response to the Reformation, the Church met in council in Trent in the sixteenth century and began a self-critical program that included a review of its use of art.

The Council of Trent met from 1545-1563 to draft the Catholic Church’s strategy to counter the Reformation. The Council subjected the Church to penetrating self-scrutiny and brought about changes that transformed the Church in many ways. The Council wanted to rid the Church of abuses, tighten up its administration, and attempt to reemphasize Catholic ideals. One target of the Church’s internal reform was religious art. But unlike Canon Law 1279 discussed above, the concern this time was more with issues of use rather than style. The issuances from Trent, known as the Tridentine Decrees, stipulated that “in the use of sacred images, all superstition shall be removed, all

filthy quest for gain eliminated, and all lasciviousness avoided.”⁴ While the Council of Trent did not address the issue of artistic style directly, it attempted to purify the Catholic Church through a reaffirmation of medieval theological ideas that, in the issues of art, would thwart individual innovation and creativity.

Art had played an important role in the Church. The early popes, bishops, and abbots acknowledged the foremost artists of the day and commissioned them for religious art. After the Reformation, the acquisition and use of art in churches was delegated to the local priests. Unfortunately, education in the appreciation of the arts was not seen as a necessary part of clerical training.⁵ The object of seminary teaching “... was not to make scholars, but pious, dedicated priests... and religious art was not treated as a topic of study.”⁶ As a result, priests chose standard and safe art, and creativity and innovation suffered.

Later Church councils in the twentieth century continued to censure distortion and innovation in art and urged bishops to bar any art that might shock, seem out of place, or smack of profanity. In 1917, Canon Law 1164 warned that “the composition of religious images is not left to the invention of the artist, but is dependent upon the laws and traditions of the Catholic Church,” and that sacred art should observe “forms received from Christian tradition.”⁷ Thus, when Couturier began his career as an artist and when he entered the priesthood, it was against a backdrop of over a millennium in which church art had emphasized the accepted, the traditional, and the safe. By Couturier’s time, religious art was in a sad state.⁸ In a 1947 article, Couturier summed it up as follows:

There is a sterility of Christian art today...

Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Léger, Rouault and Chagall. These artists have a living art, but Christian art has received nothing. Christian art and culture have shut themselves into a sphere bounded by academic traditions, from whence all life has fled.⁹

The 1930's brought two different art-related issues for the Church. The first issue was the growing use of kitsch art. *Kitsch* art is a type of cheap sentimental art that easily adapted itself to be mass manufactured. This type of art is found everywhere, but because it was widely sold in the religious stores around Saint-Sulpice in Paris, the term *kitsch* art became synonymous with what is called St. Sulpice art. St. Sulpice art is the art condemned by Couturier as being the sickly sweet art that was found too often in the churches in France. It was the degenerate church art *par excellence*. One example of this sort of art were the inspirational cards that were commercially mass-produced, easily accessible, and sold inexpensively in religious stores.¹⁰

The growing use of *kitsch* and St. Sulpician art was the result of several factors. The first is the continued reinforcement of acceptable models of religious art based on convention that was perpetuated by previous rulings and Vatican decrees. As previously discussed, both Canon Law 1279 from the eighth century and the Tridentine Decrees from the sixteenth century urged a theological, social, and intellectual conformism that would necessarily lead to an artistic conformism. Although the wording in both rulings, "approved and appropriate usage" of images was non-specific and vague, the actions of the Vatican Commissions on Sacred Art were very specific as it continued to select only acceptable stereotypes of religious art based on an academic conformism. Canon Law 1164 was equally stifling as the law stipulated that the forms used in religious art were not to be left to the artists but to the traditions of the church.

The second factor was the rise of industrialization and its attendant social changes. *Kitsch* and St. Sulpician art are easily mass-manufactured and produced in series. Because of this, it was inexpensive and widely bought and used. A social change coincident with the rise of St. Sulpician art was the disappearance of folk imagery and craftsmen, which, in turn, led to an increasing dependency on manufactured religious art. As the Church became increasingly aware of the egregious use of manufactured church decorations and these personal devotional objects, the Vatican was forced to issue an official objection to this type of art with Canon Law 1399.¹¹ Canon Law 1399 “forbids the decoration of churches with images of holy figures reproduced in series, ... (for) the spark of genius can be present only in unique artistic creations.”¹² The Church emphasized the singularity and uniqueness of art, again giving a vague ruling on the style of acceptable church art. Based on this Canon Law 1399, it would follow that the Church objected to St. Sulpician art not because it was stereotypical and academic, but because it was manufactured.¹³ With this ruling, the Church was fighting the strong secular power of industrialization; it was struggling to retain control over the art used for religious purposes.

Fighting the prolific use of *kitsch* art was difficult, but the second issue at this time was an even greater challenge for the Church. Simultaneous with their disdain for *kitsch*, clerics decried the modernist style of art being practiced by the leading French artists. Although modern art could be described as a unique artistic creation correctly in line with Canon Law 1399, it was nevertheless seen as threatening, non-readable, and thus potentially heretical.¹⁴ Modernist forms were not representational of recognizable objects, raising doubts regarding their usage for liturgical purposes. The Church felt that

the ambiguity of modern forms would compete with proscribed content.¹⁵ *Kitsch* art, on the other hand, could be defended as innocuous, with no power to move or challenge. It could “never arouse sentiments which the Church might find questionable.”¹⁶ This type of *kitsch* even had its supporters. Monsignor Labourt, president of the Diocesan Commission for Sacred Art and Liturgy said it was “inexpensive and essentially readable.”¹⁷ Gaston Bardot, a Belgian architect and city planner and important in Vatican circles said it “is not suspect except of frivolousness, it is not like modern art, a heresy.”¹⁸

The secular power in industrialism that played a prominent role in the rise of *kitsch* also played a role in how the Church fought the growing modernist art tendency. Industrialism came to define life in the twentieth century, bringing with it mechanical processes such as photography and sound recording for capturing events. Along with the decline of craftsmanship, this led to greater acceptance of photography aesthetics: i.e., the look of a ‘finish.’ This contributed to a subversion of *facture* and more emphasis on prescribed or controlled art.¹⁹ It also drew attention to the external, the visual, and the stylistic, leading to a greater separation of form and content. The growing acceptance of photography aesthetics reflected a growing societal emphasis on external appearance and the visual. The twentieth century philosopher Jacques Maritain discussed this idea of finish in regard to modern art.²⁰ Finish – bringing the image to a realistic imitation in which the brushwork, drawing and other elements of *facture* were buried – would become a standard for judging religious art.²¹ Maritain based his reasoning on the Thomist definition that ‘completeness’ is an essential part of Beauty. On the other hand, early modern painting saw paint marks, strokes and painterly values as positive characteristics, thus widening the gap between church art and modern painting. But in an

astute move, the Church adopted the growing public acceptance of photography aesthetics²² as a way to deal with the sensitive issue of modern art form. It did this by referring back to Canon Law 1279 that required specifically that a work of art must be finished or have a look or being 'finished' as part of the "due decency and respectability" clause. Sketches or models were no longer considered sufficient, again revealing the fear that certain forms or the style of art would compete with proscribed content. Canon Law 1279 purposed to protect the integrity of sacred art by eliminating signs of ambiguity, randomness, or individuality. But there was a trade-off. In prescribing acceptable church art, academicism and conformism were again reinforced.

Concern with issues of sacred art was not the exclusive domain of high Church authorities. Disagreement existed at all levels of the Church hierarchy regarding what should be considered the official Church art. The Dominican Order, to which the church at Assy belonged, chose to differ from Church authority and came to embrace modern art forms as an effective means to re-animate the spirit of the Church. The Dominicans, led by Father Couturier, would reason that the modern style in art was more meaningful because it captured more accurately the spirit of the times. The viewer could more easily relate to it, finding in it the basis for an interactive relationship that would not only reinstate the importance of art in liturgical practice, but would also reestablish the Church as a spiritual place of authority.

Further interest in religious art outside Church clergy and hierarchy was demonstrated in the formation of lay associations interested in church art. Three new French associations comprised of laity and artists fought "...tawdry, dated, sentimental, sickly, or melodramatic church art."²³ All three organizations were part of the post-

World War I movement aimed at improving religious art in France. One such organization, *L'Arche*,²⁴ whose members included architects and stained glass artisans, was desirous of more eclectic architecture and recognized that artists who created with a non-traditional idiom were generally not the artists the Church preferred. Since these artists were not likely to receive Church commissions, the association assumed the task of asking the more non-traditional modern artists to make subsidiary contributions to Church projects.

The second organization, *Artisans de l'Autel*,²⁵ concerned itself with the aesthetic reform of craft arts. This group focused on the design of devotional accessories. The third association, the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*,²⁶ offered a more extensive program for the cause of religious art. The *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* existed under the patronage of the Catholic Institute of Paris and was led by Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières. Members, including Couturier in his early artistic career, were dedicated to a communal life of piety, and members emulated the German Nazaries of the early nineteenth century in their adherence to religious conviction. The Nazaries, or the Brotherhood of Saint Luke, was founded by Johann Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr. They practiced a religious art based on the work of Raphael and Perugino,²⁷ but they also believed that the creation of truly religious art required spiritual preparation. The *Ateliers* was more comprehensive in its approach, concerning themselves with mind, body and spirit. The *Ateliers* was important in providing the right setting for Couturier to develop his artistic talents in a religious context. But in 1947, Couturier wrote in his diaries that the *Ateliers* was too systematic for him, although it had allowed him a feeling of freedom and friendship.²⁸

In spite of the scarcity of official ecclesiastical commissions in France at the end of the nineteenth century, artists continued to treat religious subjects and religious art appeared in the annual Salon exhibitions in Paris. Reaching a wider audience, artists like Léon Bonnat demonstrated more originality and greater realism than was seen in the art used by the Church. The results were not always considered positive. As one reviewer remarked about the prevalence and success of “horrible and repulsive” religious subjects at the Salon of 1883:

The Crucifixion[s] ... mark with pregnant emphasis this characteristic of today's French art. Not one of the crucifixions, a vital point of the religious life of millions, would awaken a single heavenward-aspiring thought, or even tender earthly emotion.²⁹

An example of this is Léon Bonnat's *Christ en Croix*, which has been described as both a triumph of naturalistic art and, negatively, as too realistic, too human, totally lacking in any sense of the divine.³⁰ There was an acute attention to detail in the rendering of the body, and it was public knowledge that Mr. Bonnat had actually nailed a cadaver to a cross to better study the action of the muscles.³¹

Modern society, modern art, and Couturier's dilemma

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the writers Léon Bloy, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, and Jacques Maritain became influential. They were also all read by Couturier.³² Bloy attacked the complacency of French bourgeois life. He was a Catholic and a social reformer. His novels included *Le Désespéré* (1886), *La Femme Pauvre* (1897), and *Salut par les Juifs* (1892), a tribute to Jews.

Péguy tried to reconcile the struggle for social liberty with the French heritage. He was a devoted socialist and throughout his life worked for justice and the good of the common person. He was the outstanding Catholic supporter of Dreyfus in the Dreyfus affair. Though he was often at odds with the Church, he is among the foremost modern Catholic writers. He attempted to infuse spirituality into every aspect of life, an attempt well illustrated by his great poem, *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*.

From the standpoint of Catholic literature, Claudel, in his poems and plays, was often held up as an example of the integrated writer in whom the finest elements of art and Catholicism are fused. Claudel and Maritain broadened public interest in the Catholic Church.³³ Under the influence of Bloy, Maritain converted to Catholicism, and as a philosopher, struggled to face the thorny issue of what was acceptable as sacred art.³⁴ These intellectuals did not associate as a group, but collectively their following had a significant influence. The visibility of intellectuals who were espousing religious ideas made it more acceptable for the people to be more positive toward their own religious beliefs.³⁵

Anti-clerical feelings had come to a head in the late 1890's when the Church sided with the government and army in the Dreyfus Affair. By 1901 all Church schools in France were closed by law, and in 1905, the French Church and French State officially separated. The state would no longer pay the salary of priests, and although the Church was allowed to use its existing properties, the land was now state-controlled.

The right wing faction of the French Church, the Integrists, struggled against the anti-clericals, liberals, working class parties, and members of the French Left who had steadily gained power during the Third Republic. Pervasive public dissatisfaction had

spawned radical political clubs like the Jacobins and the *Action Française*, a right-winged anti-republican movement originating in the 1890's under Charles Maurras. Maurras was "...a gifted ideologue who had seduced a large number of Catholics into his camp of reactionaries and Fascists."³⁶ The *Action Française* was condemned by Pope Pius XII in his decree of the Holy Office of 1926.³⁷

Modern art raised two basic questions in regard to sacred art: can modern art forms be appropriate forms for Church art, and do commissioned artists for church art have to be practicing Catholics? It is the contention of this dissertation that these two issues were at the crux of Couturier's aesthetic dilemma. Couturier had to justify the adoption of modern forms and the commissioning of artists for liturgical art based solely on artistic merit, and he had to do that in a way that was compatible with Church teaching. It is the further contention of this dissertation that Couturier tried to justify his endorsement of the use of modern art and the commissioning of non-practicing Catholics for liturgical purposes by appealing not only to theological thought, but to the prevailing revolutionary art ideals at the time. The contemporary theologian and philosopher Jacques Maritain took the stand that the Church cannot admit to any primacy outside itself, combined this idea with Thomas Aquinas' belief that art was outside theological obligation, and concluded that art answered only to art.³⁸ Hence the first part of the dilemma, endorsement of a specific art form or style for clerical purposes, should not and could not be subject to ecclesiastical scrutiny. The look or the style of art reflects the dictates of the enterprise of art itself.

But the production of art is not discrete nor is it created in a vacuum, and the second part of the dilemma, the commissioning of non-Catholic modern artists for church

art, proved to be problematic for clerical modern art adherents. Maritain continued to reason that the artist is man, and man is subject to the order of religion even if the work he creates is excused.³⁹ It would therefore follow, maintaining Maritain's argument, that Christian art cannot be produced by non-religious artists.⁴⁰ This was the dilemma that plagued Couturier when he arrived in America in December, 1939. This dissertation will show that these two questions of 'appropriateness' for church art will be reconciled following Couturier's return to France from his 1939-45 stay in America.

Endnotes

1. Canon law is the body of law constituted by legitimate ecclesiastical authority for the proper organization and government of the Church. The numbers assigned to the laws can vary since there have been only two commissioned attempts to organize the laws, the first time in 1917 and the second time in 1983. Before the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, the Decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) were the controlling influence on the Canon Law of the Church. Father William Espenshade, St. Margaret's Catholic Church, interview with Lai Orenduff, Riverton, Wyoming, 12 Jan. 2000.
2. Geoffredo Mariani, *La Legislazione ecclesiastica in materia d'arte sacra* (Rome: Ferrari, 1945) 106.
3. Rubin 59.
4. Ken Shulman, "A Carravaggio Leaves its Dublin Home to Visit Boston," *New York Times* 31 Jan 1999, Arts and Leisure, 33-34.
5. Granger Ryan, O.P., unpublished and undated notes, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University, 2. Hereinafter cited as "unpublished notes." Some of Ryan's notes are dated and some are not.
6. Ryan, unpublished notes.
7. T. Lincoln Bouscaren, S.J., Adam C. Ellis, S.J., Frances N. Korth, S.J., *Code of Canon Law* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963) 657. This is the 1917 Code of Canon Law.
8. O'Meara 31.
9. Couturier, *Harper's Bazaar Magazine* Dec. 1947: 121.
10. Rubin 5.
11. Professor John Beal, Department of Canon Law, Catholic University, Washington, D.C. Telephone interview with Lai Orenduff, 16 June 2001
12. Rubin 11.
13. Rubin.
14. Paul Louis Touzé, "L'Art sacré." *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 18th year, 1. 1951, 3.
15. James Coriden, Thomas Greene, Donald Heintschel, eds., *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 841. Canon 1188 states that the displaying of sacred images in the churches should be in "...suitable order lest they bewilder the Christian people and give opportunity for questionable devotion." This canon restates *Sacrosanctim Concilium* 123 and 124, which declare that the "church has not adopted any one type of art form but has admitted styles from every period. The art should be beautiful and appropriate, not repugnant to faith, morals, or piety." However, this canon was not included until the 1983 Code.
16. Rubin 12.
17. Le Chanoine Labort, *Réponse à une enquête sur l'art sacré: présentée par Maurice Brillant*, *La Croix* 10 May 1952: 2-3.
18. Gaston Bardet, "Una Polemica si allarga," *Arte Cristiana*, 38.11-12, Nov. -Dec. 1951, 129-130.

19. Abbé J. A. Hurel, *L'Art religieux contemporain* (Paris: Didier, 1868) 336.
20. Jacques Maritain, "Some Reflections on Religious Art," *Art and Scholasticism and other Essays*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (New York: Scribner, 1930) 111.
21. Michele Guerrisi, "L'Arte religiosa e la crisi del gusto contemporaneo," *Fede ed arte* Mar. 1953: 77-84.
22. The gap between church art and modern art had grown due to the Church's confusion over what qualifies as a finished work of art. Georges Rouault laments, "And it is that which they have confused with the masterpieces of the past, because it is *finished*." Rouault, "Réponse à une enquête sur l'art sacré: présentée par Maurice Brillant," *La Croix* 11 May 1952: 2.
23. James Thrall Soby, *Saturday Review of Literature*, "Modern Religious Art" 7 Jan 1950: 35-36.
24. Soby 35.
25. Soby.
26. Soby.
27. K. Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).
28. Couturier, unpublished diaries.
29. Unnamed American reviewer, "The Contributor's Club," *The Atlantic Monthly* Nov. 1883: 713.
30. Elizabeth Milroy, "'Consummatum est...': A Reassessment of Thomas Eakin's *Crucifixion* of 1880," *The Art Bulletin* June 1989: 277.
31. Milroy 277.
32. Couturier, unpublished diaries.
33. Rubin 20.
34. Rubin. Maritain was more popular among American intellectuals than in clerical circles in Rome.
35. Adrien Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*, vol. 2 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961) 316-21.
36. Bokenkotter, Thomas. *Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1990): 349.
37. Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 349.
38. Coriden et. al. 26.
39. Coriden et. al. 27.
40. Coriden.

CHAPTER II

Father Marie-Alain Couturier

Born Pierre Couturier (fig. 1) in 1897 at Montbrison in central France to a prosperous, cultured Catholic family, Couturier began his formal art training in 1919 at one of the Beaux-Arts schools, *Académie de la Grande Chaumière*, in Paris but later that year was admitted to the art program at the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*, the workshop headed by Maurice Denis and George Desvallières. It was at the *Ateliers* that Couturier was personally introduced to the idea of a Christian art revival. The program with Denis and Desvallières at the *Ateliers* aimed to form a group of "Christians that do great art." Couturier studied five years at the *Ateliers*, and at this point in his religious and artistic understanding, he was convinced that a painter did not normally divorce his work from his spiritual values.¹ The question of the artist's spirituality and its relationship to his artwork would be a major focus of Couturier's life's work. Guided by Denis' artistic philosophy and teaching and by Catholic theologian and personal friend, Jacques Maritain, Couturier grappled with this question as a trained secular artist and as a Roman Catholic priest. In his book, *Art et Scholastique* (1920), Maritain was clear on this issue – he claimed a direct relationship between the artist and his artwork.²

Before Couturier started studying art, he was politically active. He was a member of the French army, fought in World War I in the 86th artillery regiment,³ was wounded in battle in 1917, and was discharged after surgery to return to Montbrison. Prior to his induction into the army, he demonstrated his political leanings by joining the *Action*

Française, an anti-democratic, anti-Third Republic association, but he resigned from this association in 1927 when a decree of the Holy Office condemned this movement started by Charles Maurras.⁴ After his discharge from the Army, Couturier began to study art seriously, taking lessons from a local artist and exhibiting a series of etchings in his hometown.⁵

By 1925, Couturier felt another calling in his life. He entered the Dominican novitiate in Amiens that year, and became Brother Marie-Alain Couturier, setting aside earlier artistic interests and ambitions. However, his superiors and the priests at the novitiate in Amiens recognized his artistic leanings and convinced Couturier that the business of creating art and studying for the priesthood could be compatible. Now at liberty to accept art commissions, Couturier painted frescoes for churches in the Isle of Jersey, created stained glass windows in Lorraine, and worked with his early master Denis in Le Raincy. Before taking his final vows in 1929, Couturier had completed frescoes in the chapel of the French Dominicans in Oslo, Norway and had begun writing essays on the theme of the arts and religion. Later he would also be responsible for two of the stained glass windows at Assy. He was ordained a priest in July 1930.

Off and on from 1931 to 1936, Couturier stayed at a sanatorium in Sallanches in the French Alps for pulmonary health problems. While there, he also served as the chaplain of the local pilgrimage church. He returned to this region in 1939 to lead the decorative art program for the interior of what would be known as the Assy Church. It was at this small pilgrimage church that the two basic issues concerning sacred art brought out by Jacques Maritain - the appropriateness of the forms used for sacred art and the commissioned artists' religious beliefs – came to a head. Couturier and the art

program at Assy forced the Catholic Church to re-examine its sacred art program and policies.

In 1936, Couturier was appointed co-director with Père P.R. Régamey of *L'Art Sacré*, a periodical devoted to religious art.⁷ This periodical became the principal forum for his crusade against the prevalent religious art of his day and, after 1944, for the adoption of modern art for the Church. Couturier states: "When Church authorities are left to their ordinary way of functioning, the normal result is odious works: the basilicas of Lisieux, Lourdes, Fatima."⁸

Couturier stayed active as an artist with commissions at Sainte-Anne, the Dominican priory on the Faubourg Saint-Honore in Paris, and with the church decoration at Montbrison. He organized the Dominican Order section of an international exposition of religious art in Rome.

A turning point in Couturier's approach to religious art occurred in 1939 when he began to privilege art over religion in religious art, arguing that the creative process draws the artist into total submission to his art.⁹ It was also in 1939 that Abbé Devémy and architect Novarina engaged Couturier to supervise the art decoration at Assy, an assignment that had to be put on hold until his return to France from his American exile.¹⁰ An undated entry in Couturier's journal states: "But I totally love good painting, and it has been the dream of most of my life to put into our churches a little of the admirable painting done these days."¹¹

In December of 1939, Couturier began his trip to America to deliver a series of lenten speeches at a French church in New York City.¹² Due to World War II, he thought it safer not to return to France until the end of the war. His stay in America, which

encouraged him to reconsider his belief that abstract art had little religious potential, allowed him to study in greater depth the works of accepted French masters and to experience the growing international acceptance of American art. Couturier differed from other clergy who were also interested in sacred art because of the range and nature of his contacts.¹³ In America, Couturier, long an admirer of Picasso's work, met Henri Laugier,¹⁴ connoisseur of modern art and friend of Picasso's. Couturier's "contacts with expatriate artists, his frequent gallery and museum visits in NY and most of all his meeting with Henri Laugier, deepened his understanding of modern art."¹⁵ Couturier also continued his friendship with Dominique and John De Menil in the United States, a couple he had first met in the early 1930's in Paris at Jacques and Raissa Maritain's home.¹⁶ Couturier was responsible for the Max Ernst commission for a portrait of Dominique De Menil in 1934, and he continued to play a pivotal role in the formation of the De Menil Art Collection.¹⁷ Other personal contacts in North America included Henri Focillon, Julian Green, Salvador Dali, the Marquis de Cuevas, and Fernand Léger. While in New York, Couturier met with many other exiles and saw Jacques Maritain almost daily.¹⁸

The state of affairs leading up to 1939

It was clear well before Couturier sailed for America that religious art was in a decline. This was recognized by the Church hierarchy, lay members of the Church, and critics in France who had been keenly aware of this situation since the middle of the nineteenth century. As secularization and industrialization increased, traditional Church art seemed increasingly out of accord with the modern world. In addition, strong anti-

clericalism feelings still lingered. Anyone concerned with Church art would have to deal with these forces.

The period before Couturier's departure to America was also a time of new art movements and schools, three of which will be discussed in this chapter due to their influence on sacred art in France. And two additional events took place that affected sacred art theory. The first was the publication of Jacques Maritain's book *Art et Scholastique*, 1919, and the second was the church's more vigorous adoption of Thomism. Thomism is based on the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and is an attempt to reconcile faith with the intellect. This doctrine remained the leading theological influence until the Second Vatican Council, which did not take place until 1962.

In the late nineteenth century, Catholic critics became pessimistic about the state of religious art mainly because of two factors: 1) the rigidity of the academic system in France that continued to be perpetuated by the government because it was the choice of least resistance,¹⁹ and 2) the growing gap between sacred and secular aesthetics. This gap was due to a rise in completely secular and modern art that had grown steadily since the 1860's.²⁰ The widening gap between sacred and secular aesthetics was acknowledged by both anti-clerics and proponents of Catholicism, and was based on the general belief that the anti-naturalism of modern art was incompatible with religious art. Like many Catholic critics at the end of the nineteenth century, Henri Mazel, showing concern for questions of art and artist motivation, acknowledged the incompatibility of secular and sacred aesthetics, but he put the blame on a lack of aesthetic awareness by the clergy and laity.²¹

In 1906, F. Verhelst, writing in the Belgium journal *Durendal*, stated that this gap was inevitable because a fundamental incompatibility existed between sacred and secular aesthetics.²² The Catholic critic and artist, Alexandre Cingria, echoed this opinion in 1930 when he wrote "... secularists, educated people, and churchgoers alike hold strongly to the idea that the styles of modern secular art are not suitable for a church."²³ This belief, in turn, reinforced the predominance of an academic tradition of religious art, a religious art that became known by its stylistic conformity and not for its spiritual qualities.

In addition to the academic tradition of religious art, there was another style of religious art, identified as "St. Sulpice" art, that was characterized as *kitsch*. This was discussed in Chapter I. This *kitsch* could be found even in the United States, and evolved from applied commercial practices and lacked true spiritualism. It was routinely used in personal devotion cards, church publications, and church interiors, and it could be ordered through church catalogs and purchased in neighborhood stores. Catholic critics feared that the style of "St. Sulpice" art was what the general public identified as the current religious art; hence the control of religious art was lost to the secular influence of mass production. By the 1930's, form dominated content, abetted by the growth of secularism and commercialism. It was also in the 1930's that concerns with religious art took on another dimension. Discussions once limited to form and style now included the motivation of both the artwork and the commissioned artist. Was the seeming disregard for aesthetic concerns more than a lack of aesthetic sensibility? Was it intentional?

Yet the idea that there could be a modernist religious art continued to persist. This would be a religious art that was neither *kitsch* nor restrained by academic traditions.

but instead employed modernist art techniques. Starting in the late nineteenth century, salons and exhibitions featuring religious art were frequently held. The Belgian revue *Durendal* organized a *Salon international d'art religieux moderne* to be held in Brussels in November of 1895. It is significant that manufacturers were prohibited from exhibiting.²⁴ George Desvallières, a co-founder of the *Ateliers* with Maurice Denis, played a significant organizing role in the *Exposition internationale d'art chrétien moderne*. This exhibition in Paris in November of 1911 was designed to keep religious art in the public eye. A second salon of "modern religious art" opened in Brussels in May of 1912. The critic, Robert Gendebien, felt that Belgium was a country that produced religious artists comparable with the French.²⁵

But recognizing the problems of religious art and trying to solve them were two different things. The Church recognized the stagnance in its religious art, the Catholic critics had brought it to the public's attention, the Salons kept religious art in the public eye, but none of these efforts were effective in creating a meaningful religious art that reflected life in the twentieth century. One important solution presented to meet this problem was the creation of religious art workshops.

Art workshops

Catholic critics, artists, church and laity alike agreed that schools should be developed to meet the challenge of creating acceptable religious art. Awareness of this need was not limited to France. Earlier there were three schools outside France that had proposed artistic revivals in religious art that had an influence on the *Ateliers* that Couturier attended. The first school, mentioned in the first chapter, was the Nazarenes,

or the Brotherhood of Saint Luke, as they called themselves. It was founded in the nineteenth century by Johann Fredrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr.²⁶ The Nazarenes used a style after the Italian primitives. This was characterized by a naïveté, achieved through a manipulation of perspective, multiple scenes within the same setting, lack of facial expression and the use of symbols or symbolic gestures. The Nazarenes intended their work to be didactic. Although the Nazarenes contributed to the romantic movement in Germany, its main contribution in France was to the Symbolist Movement in religious art.

The second school outside of France, the Pre-Raphaelites, was a group of young artists from England with a mutual enthusiasm for pre-High Renaissance painters. They attempted to capture the innocence and purity expressed in Italian art prior to Raphael's time. They shunned materialism and hypocrisy. Their works often had a moral message, but they were not politically active. In terms of style, they showed a naturalistic truth with an accuracy in detail. Their influence on French art was not limited to religious works, as they had previously shown their work in France in 1855 at the *Exposition Universelle*.²⁷ Of the three schools, the Pre-Raphaelites were the least religious, and they were highly influenced by artistic currents in nineteenth century France. The interaction between the Pre-Raphaelites and France may be more a matter of stylistic concerns than of subject matter. The Pre-Raphaelites also added to the Symbolist impact on religious art.

The third revivalist school was the Beuron, initiated during the latter part of the nineteenth century at the Benedictine monastery of Beuron in southern Bavaria. Their work, inspired by early Christian, ancient Greek, and Egyptian art and influenced by the

Nazarenes, was characterized by simplicity, grandeur, hieraticism, purity and calm.²⁸

Their main contribution to modern religious art was the use of ancient sources leading to a style of marked angularity and formalism. Couturier's paintings show the influence of this style.²⁹ One of their converts, Jan Verkade, had been associated with the Pont-Aven group centered around Gauguin and the Nabis. The main link from the Beuron to the *Ateliers* was Paul Serusier, the initiator of the Nabis. Maurice Denis, co-founder of the *Ateliers*, was considered a core member of the Nabi group. Serusier was interested in Desiderius Lenz's aesthetics and undertook a translation of his work in 1905.³⁰ Lenz, the leader of the Beuron Movement, wanted a monastic community of artists. He believed that sacred art could only be made by artists living a Christian life within a community since art was part of a worshipping environment. The influence of the three non-French schools was strongest in reinforcing the need to revive new life into religious art, although none could be seen as a solution to the decadence of religious art.

The most influential art workshop for Couturier was the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*. Under the patronage of the Catholic Institute of Paris, the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* was founded in 1919 by Maurice Denis and George Desvallières. As mentioned earlier, Denis was associated with the Nabis, and he had to his credit many theoretical writings and was seen as an important innovator of modernist art. Desvallières was one of the founders of the *Salon d'Automne*, known for exhibiting artists of the avant-garde, and he was also a major force behind the 1911 *Exposition internationale d'art chrétien moderne* at the Pavillon de Marsan in Paris, a show that endeavored to exhibit religious art from the past fifty years.³¹ These two established artists were interested in starting a genuine renewal of Christian art. The *Ateliers* was based on an earlier 1912 Desvallières

proposal, the “*Project d’une École d’Art placee sous la protection de Nôtre-dame de Paris*,” a project that was in turn motivated by Desvallières’ contention that the decline in sacred art was due to a general intellectual and religious decline in the Catholic public, echoing the sentiments of Catholic critic, Henri Mazel.

Combined with this proposal was Léonce Marraud’s suggestion that the school be modeled after a cooperative workshop and not modeled after a traditional academic school. Marraud was the director of art education at the Saint-Sulpice seminary. Along with many Catholic critics, church hierarchy and laity alike, Denis and Desvallières felt that the growing decadence in religious art could be halted through a school of religious art.

Coincident with the founding of this workshop to integrate aspects of modern art with religious art was a secular art movement in France towards more traditional styles. Kenneth Silver spoke of this as a return to order. For Silver, postwar art in France became more conservative and adopted a new classicism in an effort to create an image of normality and unification to mitigate the ruin after World War I.³² This demonstration of the interrelationship of aesthetics and politics will include the religious during World War II; Michele Cone argued that art policies and art forms in France in 1940-1944 reflected the traditionalism embedded in Vichy ideologies.³³ Later Church rulings on art at Assy also appeared to echo this sentiment.

Desvallières had studied with Elie Delaunay and briefly with Jules Valadon at the Académie Julian before he became a student of the symbolist Gustave Moreau. In contrast to Denis, Desvallières drew inspiration from the café society and general social milieu of Paris. But like Denis, Desvallières’s style of painting developed from careful

observation and assimilation of diverse stylistic techniques. Desvallières's work at times illustrates his own spiritual turmoil and the emergence of a social consciousness and religious faith often associated with converts to the Catholic faith.³⁴ It was his espousal of an artistic doctrine based on Christian idealism that enabled him to rise above the sensationalism of social anecdotes. Thus the *Ateliers* was an attempt to answer many of the Catholic critics on the current state of sacred art. Their purpose in starting the *Ateliers* was to provide a school and workshop for artists interested in creating artwork appropriate for Church worship and liturgy, and their method of instruction was to bring together a modern artistic style and traditional religious iconography.³⁵

Initially the *Ateliers* endorsed the philosophy that the prerequisite to create sacred art was to be a Christian first. Denis and Desvallières were influenced by Jacques Maritain who was also interested in finding an acceptable solution to the decline of sacred art. Maritain wanted a religious art that reconciled secular art trends with traditional Christian iconography, and argued that the search was not for a Christian 'style,' but for a spiritual formation of the artists themselves. In *Art et Scholastique*, published in 1920, Maritain acknowledged that the modern artistic styles are problematic for traditional Christian iconography, but drew on the Thomistic theory of the Transcendental to postulate that the beauty of an artistic work, modern or not, is religious.

The *Ateliers* was first located at the rue de Furstenberg, and it was later relocated to Denis' studio at St. Germain-en-Laye. Today it is the *musée du prieuré*. It was not the purpose of the *Ateliers* to be an academic school that prepared students for the Salons or Exhibitions. Rather, it sought to prepare artists for religious commissions. In addition

to the major arts of painting, fresco painting and sculpture, there were also classes dealing with the arts associated with church liturgy. These included metal work, mosaics, vestments, and illumination. Drawing was the basis of all training, with careful instruction in geometry, perspective, and anatomy. But the main philosophy underlying the efforts of Denis and Desvallières was that a religious art should be contemporary while continuing to maintain a connection with past artistic traditions. To insure against rigid academic formulas or pastiches that often result from an undue reliance on past artistic traditions and that were so apparent in St. Sulpice art, Denis emphasized a naïve observation to insure the spiritual quality of the art.

In addition, both Denis and Desvallières called for a general intellectual and moral renewal that would necessitate a cultivation of reason. It was to Thomas Aquinas that the school turned for moral instruction and the role of the intellect in art. Just as St. Augustine tried to make sense out of history before him, St. Aquinas tried to make sense out of faith. His book, *Summa Theologica*, is an introduction to theology that is considered a classic body of work in Catholic theology. Thomism, which stresses the role of the intellect, was the predominant religious theory during the first half of the twentieth century, and some of its principles were proposed as an aid to a religious aesthetic. Thomism describes beauty as an absolute allied with certain Transcendentals, the Good, the True, and the One. Universality is another important aspect of Thomism. Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas was confident that faith and reason were ultimately compatible,³⁶ and that the relationship between art and the intellect came from contemplation. We know the essence of things through the intellect's power of abstracting what is universal from the singular and concrete data of our experience.³⁷

Both Denis and Maritain relied on the Thomistic system of art that regarded art as a matter of the intellect. Although the *Ateliers* did not create a renaissance of religious art for the twentieth century, it must be acknowledged that Father Couturier was its most influential student.³⁸

What is important about the *Ateliers* is that, unlike the three schools previously discussed, the *Ateliers* stressed innovation based on earlier artistic developments over a mere revival of earlier religious art. Innovation in the greater artistic world had an effect on modern religious art, and the *Ateliers*, under the leadership of Denis and a practical application of selected tenets of the Symbolist Movement, attempted to reintegrate French religious art into the mainstream of modernist artistic tradition. It was not his goal to secularize religion, but it was clear that the mere inclusion of sacred symbolism in the artwork did not revitalize religious art as he first thought. Noting that the Catholic public saw mainly the religious art stamped with the past,³⁹ Denis strove to bring modernist art and religious art together for the twentieth century.

Although this dissertation focuses more on Couturier as an agent for sacred art revitalization rather than as an artist, it is important to see why he was convinced that modern art was the most effective means to invigorate art in the Church. This conviction can best be understood in light of Couturier's most comprehensive and enduring study in art – his five years of training at the *Ateliers*. The ideas of Denis had a profound influence on Couturier. As early as 1889, the dedication of Denis to sacred art was made clear when he painted *Montée au calvaire*, inspired by the dramatic account of penitence and conversion in Verlaine's *Sagesse*, 1881.⁴⁰ By 1894, as a member of the Nabis, he moved from the milieu of avant-garde painters into a circle of tradition-oriented Catholic

intellectuals, and he had set forth an argument for the compatibility of Christian thought and Symbolist art in his "*Notes sur la peinture religieuse*."⁴¹ For both Denis and Desvallières, the revitalization of sacred art was a Christian mission to which they were called. The *Ateliers*' goal was to produce art less bound by academic conventions and commercial interests but consistently liturgical in an orthodox Catholic way through the fundamental principles of Symbolism.⁴² Couturier could identify with this struggle to reconcile the profane with the sacred.

Two artists had a profound influence on Denis with this struggle. The first was Gauguin. Although Gauguin was not the only artist employing Symbolist principles, Denis had seen his work as early as 1889 when Gauguin exhibited at the Café Volpini on the grounds of the World's Fair. Denis was still striving to formulate his personal style, and Gauguin's Breton works appealed to him. Denis associated the primitive simplicity of these works with an untainted morality and religious devotion that was untouched by doctrinaire Catholicism and academic conventions, and he interpreted Gauguin's experiments with line and color as an expression of self-liberation.⁴³ Like Serusier, Gauguin used planes of flat color, but equally significant for Denis was Gauguin's conscious use of religious symbols as objects of visual interest.

The second influence was Émile Bernard (who also exhibited at the Café Volpini) and his experiments in cloisonism, the flattened forms of highly saturated colors reminiscent of medieval stained glass. This method was derived from cloisonné, the Medieval enameling technique. Its stylistic elements were later included into Synthetism and then into Symbolism. The process of using one flat color allowed the artist the freedom to express a purity and a simplicity reminiscent of a simple Catholicism in which

God could be perceived in everyday life unimpeded by the growing materialism of society. Bernard hoped that his paintings would serve as icons providing religious meaning accessible to the masses. Couturier was also influenced by Bernard's belief that the formal aspects of Symbolist art were based on ideological principles of Christian doctrine: "*Symbolisme est d'essence chrétien: c'est l'invisible manifesté par le visible.*"⁴⁴ As Denis observed, he assimilated the experiments of his contemporaries into a personal style. Even his avowal to keep his Catholic beliefs primary did not prevent him from adopting modernist developments in painting and from being aware of the autonomous laws of painterly expression. The consciously included Christian symbols like those he had seen in Gauguin's Breton works were not the only things that made religious art meaningful. By 1890, Denis realized that "primacy of subject should cede to a recognition of the expressive power of the flat painted surface, and that content has no intrinsic value outside of its formal context."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the importance and primacy of formal components dictated Denis' tendency toward flatness; i.e., recognizing the integrity of the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. He stated in 1890:

*Se rappeler qu'un tableau—avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote—est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.*⁴⁶

In 1895 after much experimentation with technical innovations of artists and movements before him, Denis now had a deeper understanding of Symbolist theory. He redefined it as that which "*affirme l'expression possible des émotions et des pensées humaines par des correspondances esthétiques, par des équivalents en Beauté.*" This expression results from the artist's submission to both a subjective distortion, which is an

uncensored emotional reaction, and an objective distortion, which is dictated by the intractable laws of decorative harmony.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that this revised definition was an abridged version of Albert Aurier's (c.1892) conceptual definition of a work of art: that painting is essentially a flat surface on which a pattern of color and linear rhythms are applied, and that these representations of form and color are more reflective of the artist's state of mind than the motifs depicted.⁴⁸ As this study will show, the last part of Aurier's theory became a troubling issue for Couturier and an important factor in the Assy controversy.

His revised definition did not mean Denis was an advocate of non-representational art even though this anti-naturalistic style was representative of modernist art. There existed a religious art precedent for flatness. The tendency towards flatness was found in French religious art in the nineteenth century, which was borrowed from the stylistic traditions of the Middle Ages. Hippolyte Flandrin's frescoes at St Germain-des-Pres in Paris are an example of this. Other religious artists from the Nabis group, Verkade and Émile Bernard, also used anti-naturalistic innovations. Gauguin, however, is acknowledged to have been the major figure in this tendency, and it was Gauguin who influenced Paul Serusier to develop his synthetist style that became the archetypal work for the Nabis.

Synthetism stressed the unity of representation and form and may include elements of obvious symbolic meaning that make reference to something other than itself. The Nabis, a Hebrew word for prophets, met at the Académie Julian, and as noted earlier, Maurice Denis was included among the core group of these artists. They met once a month for stylistic experimentation and to discuss symbolist and theosophical ideas. Like

other confraternities in nineteenth century Paris, there was an air of mystery about this group. They thought of themselves as possessing a special insight that revealed ideas veiled in natural appearances and the technical knowledge to express these ideas. They communicated in codes, had clandestine meetings, but provided an "...extraordinarily rich field of intellectual activity," and considered themselves "*peintres avant tout*."⁴⁹ They were open to some form of religious content to their work, but only Denis was a committed Catholic, and the influence of religion in the others' works was insignificant.

The Nabis were an important force in the 1890s in the creation of a Symbolist style, as their overall purpose was to "illuminate the mysterious life of the spirit."⁵⁰ To meet this goal, the Nabis made action more a function of line than figure and distorted shapes and colors while flattening the forms. The flattening of forms was an influence of their study of Japanese prints, an interest that affected the Symbolist Movement as a whole.⁵¹ Even though the Nabis were using anti-natural stylistic tendencies in their art, it was interpreted as the embodiment of the spiritual aspects of Symbolism, and was seen as a reaction to the growing materialism of the time. At this point, Denis embraced Symbolism in its broadest understanding, which denotes an art with subject matter that makes reference to a higher reality, and a form of expression in which ideas are communicated through a formal syntax. At the *Ateliers*, Denis tried to show that symbolism can be a unifying factor since it allows a plurality of styles.⁵²

The poetry of Stephane Mallarme and Paul Verlaine is generally thought to have started the Symbolist Movement. Although Symbolism started as a literary movement, its preference for suggesting truths and a higher reality rather than looking at the physical world objectively not only resonated with many secular artists, but also readily gained

support from artists of religious art as well. Poets made conscious efforts to relate the realities of a transcendent order in their poetry. In general, both the literary and artistic movements shared these characteristics in common: 1) rejection of any naturalist art that held to the imitation of nature, including Realism and Impressionism, and 2) advocacy of an idealist understanding of Beauty, an absolute beauty which required expression through the material. Symbolist artists were, as a whole, reacting against traditional institutions and academic art, while the movement in general consisted of anti-materialists fighting industrialization and commercialization. It should be mentioned that early painters associated with the symbolist movement; i.e., Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, did not deal directly with Christian themes but had mixed macabre and exotic elements. These same elements influenced the Rose+Croix artists like Émile Bernard who later influenced Desvallières and Rouault. Rouault exhibited in the last of the Salons de la Rose+Croix in 1897 and was one of the earliest artists commissioned by Couturier for Assy. Péladan, founder of the Rose+Croix Salon, was part of the Theosophy Movement that practiced a more inclusive attitude toward established religion. Péladan was viewed as a defender of Catholicism in a time of growing secular tendencies and State anti-clericalism.⁵³ An important book for Péladan and other artists at this time was Edouard Schuré's *Les Grands initiés: Esquisse de l'histoire secrete des religions* (1889) which offered a pan-religious interpretation of spirituality. It was based on the theory that all religions shared universal mysteries but were created, sustained, and propagated by special prophets that could read these mysteries that were veiled in symbols. During the Symbolist period (1870-1920), there was no strong distinction between mysticism and occultism and there was no strong anti-clericalism or blanket

rejection of Catholicism, thus allowing a certain liberty with crossovers and acceptance of various expressions of spirituality. Along those lines, the Catholic critic Juste de Bernon stated in 1892 that since Christian art always suggested analogies, it is always symbolist.⁵⁴

We have shown how the form was important to Denis, and it should be understood that it was not at the expense of the content. The problem with revitalizing religious art was how to communicate religious or iconographic significance in meaningful contemporary forms. Denis argued that traditional religious subjects were “*properment la matière des chefs-d’oeuvre*,” that the masterpieces of western art are both religious and symbolist, and “*le symbolisme est une théorie chrétienne*.”⁵⁵ By 1896, Denis had committed himself to revitalizing sacred art. Denis wanted each religious artwork to be capable of encouraging a profound religious experience. The iconographic experience instructs the worshipper by providing a model or an image of the divine. It is a model providing intellectual, moral, and mystical instruction for the worshipping community. Thus we can understand the appeal earlier Synthetist and Symbolist artists held for Denis, and later, for Couturier. Symbolism was understood as “a tendency stressing the unity of representation and form and the capacity of content to be communicated through form.”⁵⁶ This formal expression was governed by autonomous laws and exteriorized in metaphors. The metaphors were symbols or plastic equivalents of interior states of mind. Thus in terms of content, Synthetist and Symbolist movements stressed the unity of content with form, and artistically, it is their stylistic approach to maintain flatness in painting that allowed religious art to reintegrate itself into the mainstream of artistic tradition and halt the decadence in religious art.

The question of the artist's religious faith that would figure so prominently in the situation at Assy was only tentatively addressed by Denis. Although Denis was a practicing Catholic, his position on whether or not a religious artist should have faith was unclear. Denis provided the students of the *Ateliers* with instruction in moral theology, but he deferred to Michelangelo's suggestion that the religious artist should lead a Christian life in order to be inspired by God; the function of the religious artist "*est de traduire en langage poétique les vérités de la Foi.*"⁵⁷ Although having faith is preferable, Denis does not state definitively that the religious artist must be inspired by God because a translation of the truths of the faith may or may not require something received through inspiration. In fact, in an essay on the art of the Middle Ages, Denis went so far as to state that he saw no relation between the faith of an artist and the religious quality of the work of art.⁵⁸

Theological leanings

The plan to revitalize sacred art by incorporating secular artistic developments in its creation seemed straightforward enough, but in the process of carrying out this project, Denis realized that the reintegration of religious art into the artistic mainstream required more than a stylistic application. Modernist tendencies required a fundamental change in one's philosophy and theology. Can Modernism, with its fundamental emphasis on nontraditional forms of expression, be compatible with traditional religious teachings? As we have seen, Denis, while still adhering to his Catholic faith, gravitated toward those teachings and artistic movements that allowed him to stretch his understanding of religion

and spiritualism to a universal level. He too was influenced by Edouard Schuré's *Les Grandes initiés: Esquisse de l'histoire secrete des religions*.

But there was another component to Denis' program of revitalization, and that was a call for a general moral and intellectual renewal. This component required a cultivation of reason, which was not problematic since the dominant theology at the time, Thomism, allowed for this. Thomism stated that faith and reason were compatible and, furthermore, that the relationship between art and the intellect came from contemplation. Now it could be assumed that even religious art required a dialogue with the viewer to be meaningful. Denis realized this early in his career when he understood that the mere inclusion of religious symbols and icons did not make a painting religious. The most immediate problem the call for a cultivation of reason did raise was the issue of personal beliefs, especially religious, of artists who would create religious artworks. How does an artist's personal philosophy and consequently, his motivation, affect the artwork? This issue became the one of the focal points of the controversy at Assy.

This was Couturier's starting point before he left for America in December, 1939, and here were the questions confronting him: 1) Which are the appropriate forms for religious art? 2) If religious art were to be reincorporated into the mainstream of modern art, then could such a fundamental change be compatible with orthodox religious teachings? 3) How important are the religious beliefs of an artist in deciding his suitability for religious art commissions?

Couturier thought Christian religious art was the incarnation of the Son of God, the Eternal Word made man. Through his Word, God creates all things and bestows on them a reflection of his own divine beauty which the artist must be able to infuse into his

work. Initially Couturier thought “that the artist would have to be not simply a believing Christian but a person living in intimate union with Christ through prayer.”⁵⁹

In terms of appropriate forms, the fear was a miscommunication of content. It was feared that modernist religious art was more a commentary on art or religion itself than a delivery of a religious idea. Ideal forms should be a synthesis of the needs of the worshipping community and the essential symbolic elements of the Church’s tradition. Couturier recognized that there was a difference between religious and aesthetic experiences, and he maintained that aesthetic or stylistic considerations should not distract the worshipper from the religious symbols. The concerns of religion are not those of art. What he couldn’t reconcile at this point was the aesthetic experience in religious art, since aesthetic experience has been characterized as a response to a form that provides its own reality and is “without practical significance.”⁶⁰ The religious experience is a response to the wider mystical reality that is meant to direct human actions. At the same time, Couturier and other critics realized that religious symbols are meant for the living community. Echoing Denis, Couturier reasoned that religious forms cannot allow themselves to be alienated from that world and should be created in the style of the wider culture so as not to be cut off from the secular society. The “message” must be a part of the culture in order to be significant to the community. The challenge was to find a form that was part of the secular context while maintaining its ecclesiastical identity and purpose.

Philosophical readings

Couturier admired Jacques Maritain’s work as a theologian and considered him a good personal friend. He was a frequent guest and participant at the discussion groups

held at the Maritains' home in Paris. Jacques Maritain was clear on his solution to the problem of religious art: the decadence of sacred art could only be solved by returning religious art to the mainstream of artistic current trends.

Maritain's understanding of art and beauty was Thomistic. The first order of importance was to distinguish what he called "fine art" from "general art." Maritain argued that fine art tends to make works of beauty and thus is an end in itself, while general art tends to make an object. Both activities required the use of the intellect and a productive activity that is directed toward making a work that serves its end. What distinguished fine art from general art was the quality of self-sufficiency. Fine art is self-sufficient because it has no function except to be itself, nor does it require anything outside itself to function. Other arts are made to serve a function and they need this outside function to fulfill their ends. To further understand beauty, Maritain referred to the two definitions of beauty set forth by Aquinas. The first is that beauty is that which pleases, and the second is that beauty is the splendor of form of the proportioned parts of matter. The first definition is empirical and is taken from the viewer's point of reference, while the second depends on three things: form, matter, and the splendor of these two. Form is similar to the Platonic form, but for Maritain, reality did not reside only in the finished form, but also in the material by virtue of the form. If beauty is the splendor of form in the material, then beauty is a contact with the divine that can be made through the physical world. To know the beautiful is to know (intellectualize) something of reality. Beauty as knowledge leads to an intellectual delight, a relationship between the knowing intellect and the work of art. Beauty has integrity, not only in the completeness of its physical form, but also in its conceptual wholeness. Maritain, concerned with the

creativity of the artist, held the concept of art as a virtue of the practical intellect. Virtue tends toward the good, and the practical intellect tends toward action, and together they are concerned with the good of the work made. Maritain, also concerned with the integrity of art, felt that art should not be made for moral or political ends:

...art belongs rather to the practical intellect, because it does not seek knowledge for its own sake but in order to make something. Hence, artists betray their art when they begin to teach or preach: beauty should be their sole aim. Works of art should not be employed as mouthpieces for a philosophy or an ideology.⁶¹

Beauty also depends on proportion and order, but this is not necessarily a strict proportion that is usually found in nature or even a symmetrical balance. What Maritain meant was that the work is proportioned unto itself - ordered and unified as a whole. If the work is integral and duly proportioned, it radiates, and its clarity delights the intellect. What is important to remember is that this clarity is a physical state created by the ordered and integral form; it is not an idea in the work of art that causes the clarity. The work of art is clear in itself.

How does the artist fit into this scheme? It is the artist who "...*découvre dans le réel des rayonnements spirituels que les autres n'y savent pas discerner.*"⁶² It is in the artist's search for Beauty, and thereby God, that these spiritual radiances are discovered and included in the artist's work. Maritain refers at this point in his argument to Aquinas and his account of the transcendentals; i.e., Being, the One, the True and the Good, which were drawn from Aristotle and Dionysius. Aristotle is the earliest to offer the concept of the transcendental and the positing of Being as the main transcendental while Dionysius

discusses the transcendentals' origin in God. It is also Aristotle who says that being resides in the material by virtue of the form, which is the same for Maritain. However, knowledge of beauty is through the particular and thus incomplete. According to Dionysius, God has an abundance of transcendence, which is diffused in all things, and it is the artist who sees and utilizes this beauty. The artist makes God (beauty) manifest through a work well done. To see beauty is to come in touch with reality. The argument that art tends toward beauty as its end enabled Couturier and much of the Catholic public to accept different styles of art as religious. And as will be discussed later in this paper, Couturier comes to accept modern abstract art as religious because of its inherent beauty.

Thus by the 1920's Jacques Maritain had examined the two issues concerning religious art - the question of appropriate forms and of the religious convictions of commissioned artists - in his book, *Art et Scolastique*. As earlier noted, this book was a protest against the decadence of religious art and argued for its rejuvenation through "the modern feeling for artistic values."⁶³ Maritain's solution to the problem of religious art was to reintegrate its traditions with those of modernist art, but still as a Christian art within a secular world. To do this, he presented a Thomistic understanding of art and beauty which argued that the artist could make God manifest through the transcendentals in an artwork well done. Maritain did not want to separate religious art from art as a whole. Hence on the question of forms, Couturier was in agreement with Maritain, eventually reasoning that only modern forms could ensure a successful Church revival. But Maritain rejected an aesthetic of complete abstraction,⁶⁴ while Couturier eventually came to prefer exactly that after his exile in America. Both wanted the Church to promote art as something good in itself, as the form that makes the transcendent present

to the people. In addition, they disagreed on the issue of religious convictions held by the commissioned artists. At this point, Maritain was opposed to the idea of training religious artists, since his position required that the artist lead somewhat of a holy life. However, he still did not demand that the artist demonstrate a life of faith.⁶⁵ Couturier, on the other hand, was more concerned with the quality of the art itself and sided with those who held that good religious art had to be good art first, regardless of the artist's faith. For Couturier, the small difference between sacred and profane art was due more to a fundamental attitude of spirituality in the artist than to his outward profession of Catholicism.

Prior to his American experience, Couturier had come to believe that the historical symbiotic relationship between art and theology had died and that inspiration for the Christian artist was lost. Agreeing with Maritain, Couturier felt that prevalent Christian art was dead.⁶⁶ What was being used and seen in the churches was a popular, academic, imitative, religious art that lacked any sense of mystery. It was "pious trash, scandalous, and kitsch."⁶⁷ The decline in religious art had most often manifested itself in the form of this overly sentimental "St. Sulpice art," a result of commercialization and industrialization that sapped all life and vitality from religious art. Not to be forgotten was the attendant cause for the decline - the growing secularization in France. Before the nineteenth century, most major art originated with the Church, but after the Revolution, religious art was made for the State, eliminating the need for the artists who did religious art to be concerned with spiritual values. Another shift in art emphasis occurred after 1905 with the separation of Church and State when the Church was free to begin concentrating on its own needs again. However, in the interim period, religious art had

not adapted itself to developments in modernist art, and the accepted masters of art were no longer doing religious art as they had in the past. This was a critical time for sacred art. This was the situation Couturier recognized early in the twentieth century.

Couturier began his art training in a traditional academic way, but upon joining the *Ateliers* with Denis and Desvallières, he combined the two main interests in his life - art and religion. Both the French Catholic Church and religious art were in a state of decline, and Couturier was convinced that a regeneration of the Church could be accomplished through a reinvigoration of religious art. He began to focus on creating religious art, influenced by the *Ateliers*' theory that traditional religious teachings could be expressed in a modern artistic style. The objective adopted by Denis was to train artists to be religious artists who would eventually create a tradition of religious art for the twentieth century that could even go beyond the church and help sanctify society. Jacques Maritain and *Art et scholastique*, 1920, provided the philosophical grounding Couturier needed. Like Denis, Maritain struggled with the same pressing problems and shared the same objective to renew religious art by reentering the current art mainstream. But unlike Denis, Maritain did not seek to do this by training artists to be religious artists, but instead sought a solution through a Thomistic understanding of art and beauty that allowed artists to use modernist art styles to create religious art. Denis sought a specifically religious art. For him, there would be something in the work itself that identified it as religious. Maritain's argument was that what makes an artwork religious is its inherent beauty, regardless of its external content. This argument opened the way for Couturier to accept modern art and reconsider the use of abstract forms for religious art that he was very much against before his exile in America.

Before the Reformation, the Catholic Church was held in high esteem and enjoyed a reciprocal relationship with the government and state. But after the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the Church not only had to defend itself in both spiritual and political matters, but found itself no longer the leading patron of the arts. To make matters worse, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of modernism, secularism, and commercialism enforced the decline in sacred art. This was the situation that Denis had to fight. Denis, an orthodox Catholic, had put a primacy on content but realized that the mere inclusion of religious symbols did not invigorate religious art. It was at this point that he acknowledged the primacy of the forms over content, conscious of the fact that the artwork followed its own laws of harmony and unity. The problem for Denis was communicating orthodox content in a meaningful manner. The answer lay in its form. The way it was visually communicated was what would re-invigorate sacred art. This naturally led to the question of motivation, both of the artwork and the artist creating the work. This was the pressing question that plagued both Maritain and Couturier.

Endnotes

1. Couturier in personal correspondence to friend, Robert Bouler. Bouler helped Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières found *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*. See Granger Ryan, unpublished lecture on Couturier, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University, 3.
2. Later on Father Couturier distances himself from Maritain's neo-scholastic interpretation of the arts. Weber, PRISM.
3. Couturier, unpublished and undated papers, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University. Hereinafter cited as "unpublished papers."
4. Bokenkotter, Thomas. *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 117.
5. Bokenbotter 349.
6. Weber, PRISM 1.
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9. Couturier, unpublished papers.
10. Ryan, unpublished notes 2.
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12. Maurice Carroll. Personal Interview, New York, 28 July 1997. Father Carroll is the current French Priest at St. Vincent de Paul Church where Father Couturier delivered his Lenten sermons. Father Carroll explains that Father Couturier's extended stay in North America during the war was not unusual. Couturier thought he could be of greater service in America.
13. Johanna Weber, unpublished remarks at the dedication of the Couturier Collection, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University, 1992.
14. Doctor Laugier was at the Université de Montreal in the early war years and later in Algiers where he became Rector of the University. Schwartzwald 2.
15. Susan Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* (Austin: U Texas P, 1989) 32.
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22. F. Verhelst, "Comment renover l'art chrétien," *Durendal XIII* 1906: 285.
23. Alexandre Cingria, *La decadence de l'art sacré* (Paris: L'Art Catholique, 1930) 70-71.
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25. Robert Gendebien, "L'Art religieux," *Durendal XIX* 1912: 267.
26. l'Abbé Abel Fabre, *Pages d'art Chrétien* (Paris: Librairie de la Bonne Presse, 1927) 568-74.
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28. Dom Laurent Janssens, O.S.B., "Dom Didier Lenz et la Beuronner Kunstschule," *Durendal VII* 1900: 417-420.
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35. Ryan, unpublished notes 2.
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39. Maurice Denis, *Nouvelles Théories, sur l'art moderne, sur l'art sacré (1914-1921)* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1922) 254. Hereinafter cited as *Nouvelles Théories*.
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CHAPTER III

Couturier in America

When Couturier sailed to America in December of 1939, he was not without doubts about modern art. He agreed with the modernists that art should create and not just illustrate, but he was still unsure what form this freedom from realistic representation should take. Furthermore, the changing succession of art styles challenged his personal conviction that there was an appropriate type or form of religious art. The question of absolutes was a persistent dilemma for Couturier: "...artists...belong to ...a world of the absolute and the perfect."¹ For the next five years, he wrestled with this dilemma. He observed how opposing viewpoints, contradiction, and compromise were handled in American art and life, selecting those ideas that would help him reach a deeper understanding of modern art.

Contradictions arising from differing opinions and individual intellectual pursuits were characteristic of modern life in America during Couturier's stay. But these opposing viewpoints were not locked in confrontation. There was instead a new type of order or "balance." Things were not always "either/or," and the fundamentally democratic quality of American expression² was communicated in a succession of art styles that ran the gamut of different subjective manifestations. It was thought that truth was not merely a matter of excluding the false. Truth had to include the seemingly incompatible in an interactive way in order to capture the depth and profundity of reality.³

The art world became a universe of contrasts, of opposing tendencies - the haphazard and the regular, the ordered and the disordered, the planned and the spontaneous - analogous to the religious liturgy that provided the framework to accommodate the expression of different individual responses.⁴ This spirit of accommodation encouraged American artists to explore new and non-traditional sources in an attempt to develop a uniquely American, yet universal, art form. This open-ended attitude - this personal freedom to act on one's convictions even though they might seem contradictory - was noted by Jacques Maritain:

I have particular admiration for the open-mindedness...to be found here, and which...[is] characteristic of American culture. American people -- not only institutions of learning, centers of research, or foundations, but a surprising number of private individuals as well -- are anxious to discover men from whom any kind of improvement in the common treasure of the mind may be expected...⁵

This is particularly significant since its author is a Frenchman, brought up, like Couturier, in the culture and traditions of his own country, looking at the American scene with European eyes.⁶

The focus of this chapter is Couturier's experience in America and how it influenced his ideas on art. This will explain why his American exile was so important, and in order to understand the full impact of this experience, several points will be covered. I will begin with a brief discussion of the social climate of America during the forties, continue with an examination of the essential points of Couturier's aesthetic theories as he embarked for America, and conclude with a study of the two major art

movements or events in America that had the greatest impact on Couturier's resolution to his dilemma over the appropriateness of abstract forms in sacred art.

The world war, which brought immense physical destruction and pain to Europe, left America's land untouched. Though America was in the war, the war was not in America. But America was not exempt from the violent world changes that occurred, and, ironically, America would benefit from these changes. Although changes occurred in every area of life, my discussion will be confined to the creative arts where old traditions were either loosened or discarded for innovative new approaches.

The war had disrupted expected behavior and motivation.⁷ Wartime instability created the need and the willingness to re-evaluate old beliefs, traditions, and approaches in an effort to find a better way to do things. The pervasive power of modernism was evident in America. At the same time, a popular version of Jean Paul Sartre's theory of existentialism further encouraged a change in art that was compatible with the emphasis on American individualism. The Existential emphasis on individual accountability, although only in its beginning stages, resonated with American artists' search for their own style, a style that would be based on a European background but clearly filtered through an American sensibility. American individualism coupled with the French embrace of democracy would influence all of Couturier's exile experiences and his eventual adoption of abstract art as appropriate for sacred purposes.

Democracy was won with the French Revolution, but in America, the individual was truly given voice. Michel Seuphor, author of the highly-regarded work in Europe, *L'art abstrait*, 1949, says of New York: "In artistic circles, the groups ... do not consider

themselves exclusive, do not wave doctrinaire banners...there is a place for everyone in this round world where everyone is on top.”⁸

As global events influenced the growth of an international art scene in New York and encouraged interaction with European exiles, Couturier, like the Americans, was now willing to consider new viewpoints and drop old traditional ways. Couturier's exile enabled him to reassess his own thoughts on art and religion and contemplate different ways of thinking that would prove to be compatible with both.

Although the democratic quality of American communication was first based on a visual imagery that was mainly religious or federal in nature, it was the Industrial Revolution that created an imagery rooted in personal experience that was perpetuated and reinforced by the guarantee of freedom of speech.⁹ It was a picture of American utilitarianism and materialism.¹⁰ Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Morton Schamberg had celebrated the new landscape of architectural forms in both traditional and modern industrial buildings. Georgia O'Keeffe and Max Weber experimented with different forms and bold areas of color.

Free speech provided for expressions of an ever-changing society, and this democratic emancipation began to blur the line between the personal and the political. The legitimacy of traditional institutions such as church, school, and government came under scrutiny, and questions moved from the customary realm of religion and morals to the politics of taste. The focus changed to amplification or interpretation instead of definition, effectively blurring the distinction between fact and opinion.¹¹

In December of 1939, Father Marie-Alain Couturier arrived in New York. He had been asked to preach a Lenten series scheduled from early February until late March

of the following year at St. Vincent de Paul Church. This was to be followed by a trip to Montreal for further lecturing and teaching. When Couturier left France, the European world was retreating toward authoritarianism and suppression of the both the individual and free expression. By the end of the decade, dictatorial governments had been firmly established in Italy, Spain, Germany and much of Eastern Europe. Mussolini created a secret police organization to eliminate opposition and stifle free intellectual expression. Spain fell prey to General Franco and his military forces, and France was torn by social conflict and battles between radical forces on the left and right. Picasso painted *Guernica* while Social Realism, which prohibited free artistic and intellectual expression, was named the official art of the Soviet Union. The purpose of Social Realism was to glorify the state through art. Hitler brought an ironclad dictatorship to Germany based on fear and racist policies. Hitler's regime was relatively tolerant of Catholic and Protestant hierarchies, and the western democracies were somewhat tolerant of fascism, perhaps because of their own fears of communism.

Across the ocean, the United States had not suffered the large loss of human and material resources that befell Europe. The country was coming out of the Great Depression. Under President Franklin Roosevelt, banks were rescued, social reforms were put into place, the farmers were protected, and collective bargaining became national policy. As Couturier would come to witness, the war would stimulate industrial production as faith in the American system of capitalism was reinforced and maintained. Economic recovery was stimulated by the preparation for a new world war. Because the language of modernization drew on capitalist prototypes of efficiency in industrial production, Americanization was seen as synonymous with modernization.¹²

In 1940, there were three components to Couturier's art theory. The first component was that there is an absolute beauty of forms. Couturier equated beauty with God's radiance and presence. It was the continual striving for this form that made art alive: "...all art is brought to life by a continual striving toward a certain absolute of the beauty of forms...that is not reached by rational effort of the intellect or will, but by instinct."¹³ This is what Couturier calls the living art. Living art breaks through the wall of academic tradition to create a new art. But newness does not necessarily imply a rejection of the great traditions of art. Tradition is not static. Forms evolve and are renewed by great artists. Thus the living art of any time is vitally connected with the living art of the past. This ideal of the existence of the absolute form is crucial to Couturier's art theories, and its development – via America – is seminal to the thesis of this dissertation. To understand this theme is to realize the significance of Couturier's ship, during his American exile, from a classical ideal of an absolute form of beauty to an abstract form. Couturier was quite insistent on the idea of an absolute form, regardless of whether such a form was classical. After his American experience, abstract forms become the absolute forms. The difference is that the classical ideal form is representational, whereas the abstract form is absolute precisely because it is not. It does not refer to or represent an external object.

The second component to Couturier's theory was that the absolute form is known intuitively. Couturier privileged instinct and the irrational over the rational and the conscious will. After visiting the Metropolitan Museum to see the Flemish primitives and later attending a musical concert, Couturier recorded in his diary (1941) that even his friend and co-exile Julien Green, the writer, makes a point of privileging things that

appeal to the feelings. Couturier wrote: "...the fake poets try to make music with ideas; the real poets, like the musicians, cause ideas to be born in us by the music of words or images."¹⁴ Furthermore, since knowledge of the absolute form is intuitive, then such a form would be non-academic and therefore revolutionary. Such a form is in perpetual revolt against academic form and initiates an entirely new departure.¹⁵ It was this attitude to privilege the intuitive over the rational that would enable Couturier to understand and accept the Jungian concept of a universal unconscious that figured so prominently in the theoretical thinking of American artists during the 1930s and 1940s.

The third component to Couturier's theory of art was that the form awakens content. His attention to form was not solely a formalistic interest but was based on the assumption that the form, "the thing of beauty," moves us from a place of stasis to a new vision of people and things. Thus the perception of a form was extremely important to Couturier. Rudolph Arnheim, who has done extensive studies in art and perception (1969, 1974),¹⁶ argued that while physiology conditions how we see, culture conditions how we organize what we see into a given image. Some aspects of form and structure are a result of perception, others a result of cultural factors. Perception is selective because of filtering. Shape is the most important feature of perception and helps to organize perceptions into culturally recognizable forms. Because Couturier saw a relationship between the spiritual and the temporal, he recognized the need for a vital art that was relevant to the people. Furthermore, the form is important because a change in forms affects all of life – thought, feeling and principles.¹⁷

An extension of the third component to Couturier's theory of art was his growing concern for social justice and his ideas of freedom. He strongly believed that Catholic

Church art must be relevant for the people. While sailing to America, Couturier found and read Henri Focillon's famous book, *Art d'Occident*.¹⁸ Focillon argued that art either expresses the life of a people or offers an escape from that life. The present art of the Church certainly did not express the life of people in the twentieth century. Nor did it offer hope of escape; it seemed merely irrelevant. Perhaps this is what Couturier was thinking when he wrote in the March 16, 1940 entry of his diary that the Church failed to understand the changing human condition. Agreeing with Pius XI, Couturier wrote: "The great scandal of the 19th century is that the Church lost the working class."¹⁹

Couturier also remarked on two other instances of the Church's failure to understand the changing human condition. One was the predominantly hostile role played by the Church in post-revolutionary France, especially in the struggles for workers' rights.²⁰ The second was the obliviousness of the Church to the on-going world-wide revolution of modernism: "Not only the working class, but the philosophers, the poets, the artists...all that world [*the modern*] was closed to us ...in the sense that we had not the faintest idea what it was all about."²¹ "The majority of the clergy have not perceived this...their thinking being more or less limited by 'conservative' habits, perhaps even by their concern to preserve a style of life and conveniences..."²² Couturier even implicated political institutions by stating: "... this 'scandal' may have been growing in Italy and Spain with the establishment of a certain political 'order' that was more or less accepted by the clergy and the Catholic lay powers."²³ Most relevant to his evolving and changing aesthetic theories was Couturier's statement that one of the Church's greatest faults was "...her failure to face the fact that the spiritual is contingent upon the temporal."²⁴ Specifically in relation to art, he came to believe that "there is not living art

unless that art has a vital connection with the life of the people, otherwise...it exerts no influence on their lives.”²⁵

Couturier goes even further. He thought the Church must be more evangelical, and he saw a greater purpose and responsibility for art. Art must not only relate to the people, but it must also provide the people with a spiritual uplift:

In this grievous time of war it would be futile and even scandalous to indulge in intellectual speculation on pure combinations of forms and colors and lines unless there were, in the perfection of these combinations, a source of spiritual uplift, a source of certain joy - or at the very least, for a great many people, an assured refuge, a shelter from the storms of these disastrous days.²⁶

In 1937, when Couturier wrote *Picasso et les conditions actuelles de l'art chrétien*,²⁷ he explained his belief that abstract art was inappropriate for sacred art because it was first of all unreadable, and secondly, it mutilated nature. But how greatly his opinion changed. In 1945 at the end of his American exile, Couturier wrote *Notes sur L'Abstraction*,²⁸ in which he compared abstract art to music in its capability to possess a religious quality:

*La musique fait la preuve qu'un art abstract - c'est à dire non-représentatif – peut avoir valeur religieuse. Cela implique donc qu'une référence explicite à un ordre extérieur de réalités sacrées n'est pas nécessaire, et que la valeur religieuse, la caractère religieux ou profane de l'oeuvre tient à l'oeuvre elle-même... les couleurs et les lignes.*²⁹

Later in the article, Couturier stated his preference for abstract art over representational art because he now saw abstract art as purer than naturalistic or realistic art:

*S'il est en effet quelque chose qui s'oppose communément au caractère religieux des oeuvres (à ce transfert des formes du domaine naturel au domaine sacré), c'est bien le poids charnel et tous les liens de sensualité qui nous attachent aux réalités naturelles. En ce sens-là, c'est l'art naturaliste, l'art réaliste qui, de soi, est antireligieux, alors que l'art abstrait, ayant déjà coupé tous ces liens, participe déjà à une certaine liberté spirituelle, à un détachement qui le predispose à ce transfert et à l'expression des réalités sacrées. "*³⁰

How did this transformation take place? Couturier's five-year stay in America was a watershed, a period of artistic and theoretical experimentation. It was also obviously a time of great exposure to the American perspective on life and an opportunity to reassess his own cultural and traditional background. The interplay of life in America and a sustained relationship with exiled European artists provided Couturier a perspective, at once dual, independent and unique, from which he could rethink his theories of art. Like a *bricoleur*, Couturier gathered ideas and opinions from his American experiences in an effort to clarify and understand the art issues that were essential for his own aesthetic theories. America, like Europe, was experiencing a period of chaos and turmoil. John Collier, appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1931,³¹ aptly described the situation: "European-American culture in the twentieth century was religiously and aesthetically shattered."³²

This chapter will show two ways in which Couturier's understanding of form changed. First, meaning and form are not always linked in functional unity, since there is more than a single correct or accurate reading of art. Art often constitutes a subjectivity and can be linked to political authority. The choice of form can even overpower content, or the meaning in form can be secondary to the elaboration of the form itself. Second,

forms in their elementary shapes, much like 2-D images, simplified to their essential core. can play an important role in freeing art (secular or sacred) from academicism. The simplicity in a primitive art can convey the necessary information more effectively than detailed representation, and Couturier witnessed this point when Native American primitive art forms were adopted by the American artists of the 1930s and 1940s.

Couturier was in a unique situation. He would witness two important American art-related movements that would have a profound effect on his thinking. The first was a movement by the American Catholic Church to reconcile the values of a new modern world with the traditional church, and the second was a struggle by American artists to develop a national American art style. Both movements dealt with art issues that were of major concern to Couturier.

The Catholic Church in America

A movement to bring modern art forms to the American Catholic Church that was contemporary with Couturier's project in France was also motivated by a general dissatisfaction with the traditional Catholic Church. The world was moving from one based on tradition to one based on progress and change, but Catholicism, centralized and hierarchical, left little room for variation. Both French and American Catholics found the Church lacking in relevancy. The Catholic Church was losing its authority and influence. In France, the Church was declining in membership while in America, the laity found the liturgical worship service in need of vitality. The idea of liturgy as art form, expressive of beauty and truth, was widespread among early pioneers of a Liturgical Movement in both Europe and America. Romano Guardini wrote in 1928 that "...liturgy is art,

translated into the terms of life.”³³ Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, a group of American avant-garde Catholics seeking a more relevant approach to Christian worship, started an arts reform movement. This group of lay Catholics became the founders of the Liturgical Arts Society, established in 1928 to “devise ways and means for approving the standards of taste, craftsmanship, and liturgical correctness in practice of Catholic art in America.”³⁴ Their goal was to reform the artistic expression of faith, and this move toward art revitalization began in America by 1932.³⁵

Unlike the sacred art movement in France, the liturgical arts movement in America was started by the laity, while it was the clergy like Father Couturier and Father Régamey³⁶ who took the initiative for arts reform in France. And like their French counterpart, the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church had also refused to affirm the revolution in art and architecture throughout Europe and America caused by what they saw as the radical subjectivity of Impressionism and Cubism, the socio-political agenda of Dadaism and Futurism, the sterility of Bauhaus design and the anarchy of Surrealism.³⁷ The Church, in spite of these attacks from the modern world, was steadfast in its unified structure, placing a high premium on authority, hierarchy and formal ritual. Ironically, the religious community from both continents chose art as the best way to revitalize the Church and society as a whole.

His American exile provided Couturier with the freedom to see that his views on art were part of a growing international movement for individual expression and individual worth. This was revolutionary thinking, and art was the arena Couturier and the American Catholics chose for the application of this concept. Both Couturier and the American Catholic leaders of the liturgical art movement explored and tested ideas of

individual subjectivity and individual opinion through their arts programs, with the purpose of engaging people on an intellectual level for a more meaningful and relevant experience, challenging the Catholic preference of imitation over instruction.

It was, however, clearly a period of anti-modernism in the American Catholic Church.³⁸ Two successive papal condemnations of Americanism³⁹ in 1899 and modernism in 1907 caused a blight of Catholic scholarship that was most obvious in the archdiocese of New York.⁴⁰ Several suspected modernists on the faculty of St. Joseph's at Dunwoodie, NY, the archdiocesan seminary, were dismissed, and the progressive theological journal, the *New York Review* (1905-8), was forced to cease publication.⁴¹ Only theology that was integrist in outlook was granted the blessing of the hierarchy and the Roman Curia.⁴² As a result, the type of artwork in the *St. Sulpice* Church in France that Couturier described as "sickly sweet" was also found in most of the Catholic churches in America. This was a saccharine and sentimental art that lacked artistic merit or theological depth and did not point to any state of relevancy between faith and the artistic and intellectual life of current church members.

The lack of relevancy had not always been a problem. The early membership of the American church - the Irish, German, Latin and Slavic immigrants - had been satisfied with the Catholic Church's traditional non-reading approach to worship. Unlike the Jewish religion with its historical tradition of textual study and correlation, the text was not traditionally incorporated in communal Catholic worship. This resulted in the visual arts being paramount in church rituals and liturgy. Catholicism was an oral and visual culture. Truths were not learned as much as they were passed down to be *experienced* through sight, smell, and hearing - but not literacy.⁴³

Reading from the Bible was not a common Catholic family ritual. It was generally accepted that Bible-reading and its interpretation was best left to the clergy, men educated and trained in spiritual matters.⁴⁴ But by the 1920s and 1930s, the first generation of church members, the lower socioeconomic group of immigrants, had been replaced by a body of American-educated and cultured Catholics who looked to their Church for a greater artistic and intellectual expression. Until World War II, converts supplied the Church's intellectual leadership. They were better prepared educationally than the working class immigrants who constituted the bulk of the faithful, and they were conversant with the surrounding non-Catholic culture.⁴⁵ Whereas the earlier members had been satisfied to leave explanations of doctrine to educated priests and nuns, the current members were no longer willing to let understanding take a back seat to memorized correct responses.⁴⁶ The greater intellectual needs of American Catholics were reflected in the progressive rise and development of American religious periodicals.⁴⁷ No longer satisfied with periodicals that limited their articles to examples of pious living and short biographical essays for the edification of readers, there were in print by the close of the nineteenth century at least thirteen religious journals of a new sort.⁴⁸ Examples included *Catholic Historical Review* (1915), the *Commonweal* (1924), *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1939), and the *Thomist* (1939). These were periodicals geared to an educated religious readership, and they contained articles that related religious beliefs to the events and currents of the times.⁴⁹

The *Commonweal* was devoted to public affairs, literature, and the arts, and it took liberal positions in secular political matters and advocated ecumenism among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.⁵⁰ It maintained that theological questions were too

important to be left solely to official spokesmen and did not hesitate to question theological conservatism and an unresponsive ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁵¹ It stood firmly on "...Catholic moral principles while affirming American democracy and pluralism"⁵² and elucidated "orthodox religious principles and their application" to reflect the "continuous unbroken tradition and teachings of the historic mother church."⁵³ The *Commonweal*'s devotion to social action was a dominant concern from the beginning, and this journal even went so far as to consider contributions from those who "hold different forms of Christian belief and in some cases to authors who do not profess any form of Christian faith."⁵⁴ Consistent with its purpose as an organ of lay Catholic expression and in agreement with The Liturgical Arts Society, the *Commonweal* advocated a revitalization of the church through increased lay participation, arguing that "...the Church had much to learn from democratic society, that concepts like due process of law would improve ecclesiastical life, that democratic society came closer to the Gospel than any authoritarian regime."⁵⁵

In 1941, *Theological Studies* became the preeminent Catholic theological journal in the United States and with its editor, John Courtney Murray, SJ, helped shape thinking on religion and society. His interest in practical theology led to the inclusion of studies and discussions of American church life and its pluralistic context in his journal.⁵⁶

The Liturgical Arts Society

The Liturgical Arts Society met for the first time in 1930. Membership included Charles Maginnis, president and head of a successful Boston architectural firm, Michael Williams, editor of *The Commonweal*, Maurice Lavanoux, and John LaFarge, SJ, editor

of *America* and son of John LaFarge the artist. In addition, Ralph Adams Cram, one of the few non-Catholics participating in the Society, played an important role in shaping the artistic program of the American Catholic Church. Cram not only wanted an organic unity between art and religion but also between modes of production and social organization.⁵⁷ Adapting what would be later recognized as a typical American characteristic, a “can-do” type of pragmatism, the organization saw itself as giving practical advice and concrete suggestions for artist, priest and layman. And like Couturier and the journal, *L'Art Sacré*, the Liturgical Arts Society published a journal, *Liturgical Arts*, which was often used as an influential forum to discuss issues of modern art. The Liturgical Arts Society received encouragement from Rome, from Couturier’s fellow exile and friend, Jacques Maritain, and even from the secular world.⁵⁸ George Lober, the Executive Secretary of the Art Commission for the City of New York, wrote to Archbishop (later Cardinal) Francis Spellman, “...a pleasure to watch the work being carried out by the magazine *Liturgical Arts* under your patronage.”⁵⁹

The Liturgical Arts Society had an active program and grew in prestige. It saw itself in a dual role within the liturgical movement - to provide accurate liturgical information to the Church’s membership and to be the voice of those planning and designing the actual liturgical settings. Lavanoux, as representative of the organization, served on art competitions, gave lectures, and was seen as an expert on ecclesiastical art. He gave radio broadcasts on the “NBC Catholic Hour.”⁶⁰

But like the sacred art movement in France, this organization was not without its problems. In 1942, the Liturgical Arts Society sponsored a competition for a statue of “Christ, the Light of the World.” It named George Kratina the winner, but this choice

could not be accepted by the Church because the American bishops concluded that "...it [the winning model] could not be identified with Christ."⁶¹ The jury selected by the Liturgical Arts Society was suppose to have had the final verdict, but clearly it did not. The growing trend for greater inclusion of differing opinions had not yet caused a change in the decision-making policies of the American Catholic Church. The bishops continued to assert their authority over the selection process. A similar confrontational situation was repeated at the end of the decade when the French Catholic Church hierarchy removed from the main altar area of the church in Assy the Germaine Richier crucifix commissioned by Father Couturier.⁶²

The America Catholic Church struggled to integrate modern and more progressive attitudes in its art programs, believing like its French counterpart that art was the means to rejuvenate the Catholic Church. Its goal was to "make the church's cultural heritage, including the liturgy, more effective and fertile in the modern intellectual and artistic life of the United States."⁶³ The artistic requirements of the current church membership had changed, prompting a need for a corresponding change in its art program. The Church, in refusing such a change, communicated a backward look to the past while the current membership now looked to the future.

The War, while bringing international pain, horror and destruction, was also the impetus that catapulted America into the international arena. Americans grew in their new role as economic and political leaders. In spite of the Church's lack of artistic initiative, the Liturgical Arts Society had become a dominant force in international religious art and architecture by the end of the 1940s. *Liturgical Arts* magazine was the envy of other arts magazines, and their ideals were widely known. One of their issues

was devoted to Assy and the question of using abstract art for sacred purposes. In 1950, Maurice Lavanoux, at Cardinal Spellman's New York residence, received the Papal Benemerenti medal for his devoted and effective efforts toward the advancement of the arts of the Church. He was also appointed to the US delegation of the First International Congress of Catholic Artists.⁶⁴

Many parallels can be drawn between Couturier and Lavanoux and their respective publications, *L'Art Sacré* and *Liturgical Arts*. Both men focused discussions in their publications on the use of arts in church decoration and liturgy. Both men provided the energy to sustain the life of the movement and the publication even though in both cases the Church hierarchy was somewhat indifferent to its success and did not assist the publications in any public way. In their printed and verbal discussions, both Lavanoux and Couturier expressed an openness to non-western sources, somehow believing that these cultures were less tainted by the pitfalls of modernism. Capitalism in both countries had created a burgeoning industry of consumer goods. While Lavanoux and Couturier viewed the use of blatant commercialism as "selling out," religious goods catalog sales companies controlled the state of religious art by mass producing and selling products of deplorable quality in America and France. The parish often could not afford a private commission, so it was forced to turn to the church goods houses and buy the mass-produced work.

Although the American Liturgical Movement concurred with the Sacred Art Movement in France in reflecting dissatisfaction with the current church, subtle nuances and circumstantial differences between the two movements can be seen. In the first half of the 20th century, the Roman Catholic Church in America was a minority religion.

while in France it was the dominant religion with a long history of co-operation with the government and aristocracy. Although there was a separation of Church and State at this time, the French Church had aligned itself with those who felt displaced by republican sentiments following the French Revolution, and it had cemented a newly found power during the Second Empire when royalty came back into style. Americans were trying to build church membership and lay influence, while the French were trying to revitalize its waning power and diminishing membership.

The Liturgical Arts Movement was created to meet the needs of a changing church membership and was spearheaded by a group of well-educated lay intellectuals. The Sacred Arts Movement became the forum and testing ground for two priests interested in art - one a trained artist, Father Couturier, and the other an art historian, Father Régamey. The Liturgical Arts Society wanted to co-ordinate and make more relevant the use of art with church liturgy. More specifically, it wanted to use art to reach its members on a more interactive level, as it was opposed to evoking merely an emotional or memorized response.

The Sacred Arts Movement also privileged the arts, but Couturier emphasized the forms themselves, not necessarily how they correlated with church liturgy. Couturier, exercising his utopian convictions, was more interested in the visual image, convinced that it was the forms themselves that would be the means of revitalization. A change in visual imagery would cause a change in the way the members viewed the church and the world. The traditional hierarchical structure in the French Roman Catholic Church viewed the clergy's role as didactic and the lay members as recipients of the clergy's education and knowledge. Church authority, by controlling what the viewer sees, can

control what the viewer knows and feels. The church wanted to maintain its control over the viewer's response and had been reluctant to give up this power. But Couturier wanted to reinsert the mystery of worship into the service by allowing the viewer to have more of an individual response. He felt greater audience interaction would be encouraged by the removal of tasteless commercial stock models of art. Acknowledging individual responses would allow the members to experience a deeper and more meaningful participation in the worship service.

In the American Movement, the idea was to make the worship service more relevant by coordinating corresponding changes in art and liturgy. Changes in liturgy were imminent because the new intellectuals who led the American Movement desired a greater lay participation in church service, even including a greater intellectual involvement. The American Catholics saw an almost organic unity between the liturgy and the life of the Roman Catholic Church. The liturgy was the way religious people integrated the past, present, and future. They believed that if the internals - the liturgy - were looked out for, the externals would take care of themselves.⁶⁵ The American Catholics saw themselves as inheritors of a rich liturgical tradition that allowed for a variety of ways in which the sacraments could be celebrated. For the French Church, the question of internals and externals, especially in reference to artist commissions, remained an unresolved issue. Does and should visual manifestation reflect the spiritual or sacred commitment of the artist? What is the relationship between the internal homage of the artist's soul and its outward bodily expression by means of word, ceremony or other visual art form? For Couturier, the problem was not changing the liturgy so much as it was transforming the worshipers.

Importantly, Couturier would discover that the greater intellectual relevancy needed by the American Catholics did not automatically mean that the art would be less spiritual. As is characteristic of chaotic times, Americans were beginning to think less in terms of rigid polar opposites: i.e., rational vs. irrational, secular vs. sacred, thinking vs. passivity, etc. Instead, they would often hold what seemed to be direct contradictions in a type of abeyance or balance. Herein lies a significant part of Couturier's American experience – that while observing the “can-do” type of pragmatism reminiscent of the pioneering spirit and part of the immigrant's feeling of optimism – he would understand what accounted for the feeling that that we, as Americans, were entitled to more of a voice. It was a move from privilege to entitlement resulting from a greater freedom to question. The two publications reflect this contrast in attitude - *Liturgical Arts* was more practical, concrete, and grounded in function; *L'Art Sacré* was more spiritual, working on a transformation in sensibility. Interestingly enough, both the *Liturgical Arts* and *L'Art Sacré* maintained a decidedly neutral stance in the area of world and national politics. They maintained almost total silence on the subject of war. However, both Couturier and Lavanoux did take advantage of the American mass media - writing, teaching, lecturing, arranging art exhibits, mentoring, art consulting, and broadcasting - and became international figures because of it.

The American Art World

The second major influence on Couturier was the growth and development of American art stimulated by global events and the expanding art world in New York. New York's art scene reflected the variety of artistic impulses from both Europe and

America. There were those who continued to consider Paris the artistic capital, but many Parisian places had closed,⁶⁶ and during the Vichy occupation, authorization for a gallery or salon to function required permission by the Propaganda Abteilung, a branch of Goebbel's Propaganda Ministry.⁶⁷ Furthermore, France had been traumatized by WWI and experienced a loss of confidence and a corresponding resistance to progress.⁶⁸ In the period between the two great wars, French artists sought the concrete and the traditional, the *retour à l'ordre* Kenneth Silver spoke of in *Esprit de Corp*. Artists abandoned abstraction for motifs and traditional methods.⁶⁹ They went even further. They not only looked to the landscape as a type of rootedness that reassured an unbroken genealogy of French art, but also as metaphor for the body in a *retour à l'homme*.⁷⁰

New York became a safe haven for many European artists and the hub for American artists as well. In addition to artists, European exiles included intellectuals, critics, dealers, and even museum directors. A network of relationships among dealers, museum people and artists flourished. Julien Levy, Pierre Matisse, Nierendorf, Curt Valentin and Peggy Guggenheim, Alfred Barr, Jr., and Museum of Modern Art curator James Thrall Soby became the key dealers. Tanguy, Matta, Mondrian, Masson, and Ernst had solo gallery shows shortly after they arrived.⁷¹

Couturier experienced this not only as an observer, but also as a participant. He frequented art shows, openings, and museums, and he reviewed Jean Charlot's show of religious paintings at the Bonestell Gallery on 57th Street,⁷² all the while absorbing ideas from conversations and discussions that would influence him to re-evaluate his position on abstract art. In a letter dated June 23, 1941, Couturier recounts his visit to the Barnes Collection: "Yesterday I went to Philadelphia; thanks to Laugier's kind intervention.

Barnes showed me his collection. It is unimaginable. You get the feeling that anyone who has not seen this collection cannot know what modern painting is." About Barnes he said: "Barnes was delightful. He gave me his book on Cézanne, and my friends cannot get over it because he has the reputation of being a holy terror who wants nothing to do with Catholics, priests, Jews, etc."⁷³ In the March 20, 1942 diary entry, Couturier described the crowd at the Douanier Rousseau exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art as, "the gentlemen in evening dress, the ladies covered with real pearls, a dozen or so of artists – also real - who, the other evening until nearly midnight, filed through the exhibit."⁷⁴ In 1943, he remarked with irony that a German was responsible for one of his most enjoyable hours spent at a gallery. He was referring to the Erik Maria Remarque Collection exhibited at Knoedler: "A taste for precision in spheres where liberty is the supreme law...., a disdain for means that are facile or too opulent or obvious, an artistic consciousness raised to an intransigence heretofore unknown, all these things brought to mind by these modest, but perfect, works signed by the most honored names: Delacroix, Daumier, Degas, Lautrec, Cézanne, Renoir, Van Gogh, Utrillo."⁷⁵

Couturier's involvement with the New York expatriate community included Dali, Henri Focillon, Léger, and the writer Julien Green.⁷⁶ Green, a French novelist and playwright whose parents were American, was a member of the *Académie Française*.⁷⁷ In an April, 1942 entry of his diary, Couturier says of Dali: "It is accidental that his genius turned to painting; his ideas and his conversation surpass his paintings. His mastery – the absolute possession of all the means of the medium – adds to his stature by all the powers they contain."⁷⁸ Dominique de Menil, in her talk at the dedication of the Couturier Collection, spoke of Couturier's relationship with contemporary artists: "They

were all his friends. He knew them and they knew him as priest and artist – Matisse.

Braque, Léger, Picasso, Dali, Renault, Chagall, Bonnard, LeCorbusier...”⁷⁹

Although most of Couturier’s exile was spent in New York, he did travel to other parts of the United States and to Canada. With Focillon, Léger, Ozenfant and Zadkine, he created *L’Institut Francais d’Art Moderne* in Canada. Couturier had a great respect for Focillon whom he considered an old friend. When Couturier later reconsidered his views regarding abstract art, it was to Focillon that he wrote: “Now I see clearly that what I said was too hasty.”⁸⁰ In his tribute delivered at a memorial convocation in honor of Focillon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on April 3, 1943, Couturier speaks of Focillon’s ability to express his ideas on art. Focillon understood that the world of art - the world of forms - was autonomous: “...that plastic forms had a life of their own... following demands and laws which are not those of the real world... and beyond the frontiers and restraints of the real world.”⁸¹

Couturier continued his friendship with the de Menils, people he had met in Paris at one of Jacque and Raissa Maritain’s weekly gatherings, and he was a visitor to the de Menils in Houston on several occasions. It was the de Menils who recognized that in 1939 Couturier was still “a prisoner of habits, of constraints, of prohibitions and misunderstandings about art” and felt that “America was to release him from these restraints.”⁸² It was Couturier who encouraged the de Menils to collect art, and the de Menil holdings are now one of the greatest private art collections in the United States. It includes paintings by Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Léger, and Ernst. It is home to the Rothko Chapel, *Broken Obelisk* by Barnett Newman, the Cy Twombly Gallery, and a recently opened Byzantine Chapel that contains two thirteenth century Byzantine frescoes

ransomed by the Menil Foundation from art thieves.⁸³ Father Couturier was an important friend for the de Menils in questions of religion and art. It was he who helped them with their art collecting during the forties, and it was he who helped the de Menils provide an “aggressive spirit of modernism” for the growing cultural scene in Houston.⁸⁴ Whenever the de Menils traveled from Houston to New York during 1943–45, they met with Couturier to visit exhibitions and art dealers to add to their private art collection. They continued to meet with him after WWII in France.⁸⁵

The Rothko Chapel, dedicated in 1971, is a great tribute to Father Couturier’s artistic influence that “...predisposed the de Menils to the idea of commissioning a church from a contemporary master.”⁸⁶ Dore Ashton writes: “The thoughts of a man of the cloth, Father Couturier, who had engaged many modern artists in church decoration, are closer to Rothko’s situation than those of the art historian: Father Couturier thought that ‘genius doesn’t give faith, but there is between mystical inspiration and that of heroes and great artists a profound analogy.’”⁸⁷ Couturier, after his American exile, came to believe, like Rothko, that the mystical and spiritual are intrinsically linked.

As a priest, Couturier was comfortable with tradition, and he could accept earlier art movements and philosophies brought over by European artists. It was important for him to acknowledge European masters. But as a trained artist, he was equally aware of the impact modernism and mass commercialization had on art. The problem was how to create meaningful art in a new world while still respecting past traditions. In Europe the artistic ground had been laid for Couturier. Aspects of modernism that had a probable influence on his thinking would include multiple perspectives of art. Cubism had given the world a new way of seeing and looking at representation. Things were broken down,

fragmented. The object was no longer faithfully reproduced on paper. Cubism released painting from the burden of one-to-one correspondence and realistic representation. The line, the graphic mark, the plane – all formal elements had now been elevated to a greater importance in and of themselves. This art approach seemed to correspond to the fragmentation of life created by the war and modernism.

Symbolism, like Cubism and Constructivism, did release painting from illusionistic representation, but unlike Cubism, it bestowed a greater responsibility on painting – that of referring to a higher knowledge, a spirituality through the art. The works and philosophies of Kandinsky and Mondrian reiterated this additional responsibility for painting. Kandinsky saw the reunion of spirituality with objects as the key to combating the materialism that had occurred in society, and for Mondrian the Neoplatonic proposal of the absolute form, which he called the universal, was reached through art. Couturier's modified aesthetic theories will reflect the ideals of a higher knowledge and spirituality through a specific form that Kandinsky and Mondrian advocated.

This was the artistic background Couturier brought with him. In America, he would be introduced to new interpretations of these artistic perspectives. By the early nineteen thirties, American art was split in three groups: social realism, regionalism and abstraction. The abstraction group was the smallest and was mostly concentrated in New York.⁸⁸ For purposes of this dissertation only the abstract movements will be discussed. For it was the abstract art form that Couturier came to view as the living dynamic art form that provided the link between the art of yesterday and today that would revitalize the Catholic Church. In the past, Europe had been the leader in all fields of plastic and

visual arts, but now it was the American artist who would show the spirit of originality, inventiveness, and freedom from established customs and conventions that pointed the way to the independent aesthetic thoughts that Couturier shared. It was the spirit of abstract art that represented the enormous widening of man's sense of liberty. And it would be abstract forms, without literal representational references, that spoke of issues that were more universal and were found in all societies. Other styles like realism and regionalism seemed to highlight world differences and thus were divisive. Based on European theories, but influenced by American culture, some distinctly American styles of painting developed. By the time Couturier arrived in New York, the legacy for American modernism had been established.

By the end of the nineteen twenties, the Museum of Modern Art was established and opened with works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Seurat (which was also the first MoMA loan exhibit).⁸⁹ In 1935, the Whitney Museum of American Art held their *Abstract Painting in America* show; in 1936, the Museum of Modern Art opened their *Cubism and Abstract* show, an exhibit of European artists of these abstract movements; and in 1939, The Fourth Catalog of Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings opened on January 6, then traveled to Baltimore, Maryland after January 29 of that year.⁹⁰ Although the predominant art seen by the public related to the depression in the cities and American rural scenes, there was a significant enough interest in the abstract art of Mondrian by late 1936 to form the American Abstract Artists Association. To meet the growing interest for abstract art, Harry Holtzman, secretary for the American Abstract Artists⁹¹ had rented a loft, collected works from the abstract artists, and organized meetings to discuss the art situation. This was a broadly inclusive

and diverse group of both known and unknown artists operating under a general interpretation of abstraction as that which is non-representational.⁹² Influenced by Mondrian favoring a more geometric style, this movement released painting from past traditions and habits since its function was no longer restricted to recording nature. Artists were now interested in nature's mysterious laws, not in imitating nature. As Ibram Lassaw, a member of the Abstract Artists Association, stated, "The important thing for art is to be alive, to be full of suggestion and possibilities, to enlarge our sensibility and to intensify experience"; the artist does not depict reality, "he is actually making reality."⁹³ Thus, this group of American artists came together with hopes of educating the American public about abstract art, of promoting a solidarity among the abstract painters and of identifying venues for group exhibitions. To promote the abstract cause, they published illustrated pamphlets to show "...that abstract art is the most legitimate and authentic expression of contemporary international culture."⁹⁴ In April of 1937, the American Abstract Artists held their first exhibition at the Squibb Gallery in New York with over one hundred works by thirty-nine artists.⁹⁵ They continued to show as a group yearly at such diverse places as The Gallery of the American Fine Arts Society, Columbia University, the Contemporary Arts Gallery of the 92nd Street Y.M.C.A., Municipal Art Galleries, the Riverside Museum, Galerie St. Etienne, Nierendorf Gallery and the Mortimer Brandt Gallery.⁹⁶ These exhibitions included publicity, criticism and even sales. Fernand Léger, a good friend of Couturier, was one of the twenty eight members in 1937. Furthermore, George L. K. Morris, also an Abstract Artists Association founding member, educated at Yale, had studied with Léger at the *Académie Moderne* in Paris. Morris' work at this time indicated a simplification of form that he

attributed to the influence of Léger, whom he described as “the real primitive” whose art arrived at the “core of the primitive impulse.”⁹⁷ At the 1937 well-attended opening of abstract works at Squibb Galleries, 745 Fifth Avenue in New York City, Ibram Lassaw⁹⁸ wrote that the qualities of the works themselves showed a new direction for American art with an emphasis on its underlying structural fabric and an honesty of presentation to form a new viewpoint of art. The abstract artist had related his experience in terms of his medium.

However, these artists were not concerned solely with formal and technical issues: they were as interested in theory as their European counterparts. Although their initial purpose as an organized group was to arrange a group show, they also met for the exchange of art ideas. Léger not only exhibited his paintings in America⁹⁹ but lectured and taught as well. Some of his lecturing engagements include a talk on abstraction at the Museum of Modern Art (1935),¹⁰⁰ Black Mountain College in North Carolina and courses at Mills College in Oakland (1941), lectures in Washington DC, Harvard, and in New York (1943), and lectures in Chicago, Boston, and Montreal (1944).¹⁰¹ Mark Rothko, although not a founding member of the Abstract Artists Association, acknowledged the value of discussions held at Milton Avery’s in the 1930’s in the formulation of his color theories, his assertion of the active two-dimensionality of the picture surface,¹⁰² and his objective to create an “inner light.”¹⁰³ It should be recalled as brought out earlier in this chapter that it was Couturier who helped convince the de Menils that Rothko’s work exemplified mystical inspiration. Meyer Shapiro’s much discussed article, “The Beatus Apocalypse of Gerona,” described the use of stacked color bars and highly saturated colors in eighth century Spanish manuscripts, and is said to

have had an influence on both Rothko and Léger in the early forties.¹⁰⁴ Although Couturier may not have participated in these discussions with Avery, Rothko and Shapiro, it is probable he had similar discussions with Léger, whom he later commissioned to do the front façade for the Assy Church. These were precisely the types of discussions that encouraged Couturier to reassess his personal views on abstraction.

America's developing stylistic forms were highly influenced by art that went beyond its national borders. In 1938, the editors of the catalogue for the American Abstract Artists show wrote that understanding abstract art meant perceiving essentials and that which is "universally significant."¹⁰⁵ American artists reached for a universalism that was found in primitive art in America. These primitive forms spoke of issues that were found in all societies, regardless of the country. These forms, interpreted through the Jungian sense of the collective unconscious that binds all peoples together, had a modern currency. American artists were looking at primitive work for their forms. In 1940, Rothko began a new body of work using mythological subject matter as well as primitive sculptural forms in an attempt at universality.¹⁰⁶ Influenced by Jungian thought, Rothko, like many contemporary artists of the forties, saw these primitive forms as an embodiment of the deep needs found in all people. These were forms of a collective unconsciousness and universality. This is one of the most important conceptual influences of Couturier's American exile – that primitive art forms had a connection with modern art forms. "The sculptures of the primitives, ... even in its abstractions, always implies a will for what is human." "What we see emerging from the restraints of primitive arts is just that spark of fraternal humanity..."¹⁰⁷ It was this concept that helped Couturier reconcile his choice of art forms with the Church's current

goal. Couturier understood that the Church did not want social utopianism but recovery of its mystique, its intuitive center and its essential and ancient forms. However, the academic religious art currently in use eliminated all mystery, was too precautionary, and retreated from facing the difficult problems of post-industrial Europe. But his relationship with artists who participated in discussions on the universalism of primitive art enabled Couturier to change his aesthetic sensibility and therefore transcend the perils of institutional decadence. Current with the thought in the American art scene, this change was a return to a simplicity that disposed of material things and the increased secularism brought on by industrialization. In his many later references to primitive art, Couturier considered these art forms undefiled by academicism. It was this specific artistic space within the greater cultural movement that influenced Couturier's subsequent views on art.

For American artists, the primitive form most readily available was found in the Native American culture. George L. K. Morris, earlier mentioned as a co-founder (1936) of the American Abstract Artists, made many works on the theme of the American Indian. He was convinced that this primitive American art represented a genuinely American aesthetic.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Morris felt that the use of Indian subject matter was part of the international language of modern art.¹⁰⁹ Like most of the other members of the American Abstract Artists, Morris wanted a universal abstract art that was not limited to historical or temporal elements, and he stressed the formal and the purely plastic qualities to avoid any hint of exoticism. And of equal importance is Morris' observation that even "from the earliest times the nature of American art was abstract in feeling."¹¹⁰

Four groups of artists, the Transcendentalists, the Indian Space painters, the American Abstract Artists, and the Abstract Expressionists, exemplify the complexity of the abstract movement in America. Although all of these groups paid special attention to the two trends to be discussed below, each appropriated only those ideas from Native American art that best fit their emphasis. This illustrates the type of complexity observed by Maritain when he commented on American openmindedness.¹¹¹ Given the close relationship and frequent discussions between Couturier and Maritain, this would very likely have influenced Couturier's thinking. It illustrated his growing realization that abstract art could be based on traditions, and it showed that spirituality need not be lost in abstract forms. Couturier writes after 1947 "...what gives art its dignity is that it raised the body and the senses to the spirit's mode of knowing – disinterested, without contact and without possession." "In order to be religious a work or art ...must be painted...with a certain spirit ...a sense of the mystery."¹¹²

The first trend could best be understood by the belief that the vitality and spirituality of Indian life, as expressed in its art, would have a positive influence on American life and art. Primitive forms were so important at this time because they expressed a unity and a collective spiritual nature that was vital and pure; they represented a state untainted by the capitalism and secularization that was beginning to typify American life. As early as 1919, John Sloan spoke of Native American primitive art as representative of "...a most closely knit religious and aesthetic culture."¹¹³ For Sloan, aesthetic experience and spiritual experience were indivisible among the Pueblos, and he publicly recognized "...the value of Indians to this country, their philosophy, their art, their dignity, [and] their immense inspiration to modern artists and writers..."¹¹⁴

Sloan was responsible for the first New York showing of Native Pueblo art in 1919.

Robert Henri, searching for an art spirit to express national values, felt each individual work of Native American art expressed the spirituality and communal greatness of the Pueblo.¹¹⁵ American artists, through the use of Native American art forms and collective commentaries tried to regain a sense of community and social intimacy that seemed to be present in Native American life.

The second trend involved the growing belief that primitive art, especially its mythic and ceremonial nature, was a manifestation of a universal unconscious suggested by C. G. Jung's concept of a collective unconscious. Jungian interpretation of primitive and neo-primitive art was commonplace in the early 1940s, as witnessed by the paintings that referred to atavistic myth, primordial origins, and primitive rituals and symbols.¹¹⁶ Examples of Jungian interpretation of primitive art include work by Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Mark Rothko. These artists painted references to myth and primitive symbols showing their desire to transcend the particulars of history and search out the universal values to which Jung's concept of a collective unconscious referred.¹¹⁷ Concomitant with the two trends were the large number of exhibitions, books, and articles about Indians and their art during the 1930s, reinforcing the interest in primitive forms at this time. Two major exhibitions included the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts in the Grand Central Station Galleries in 1931 and the Indian Art of the United States at The Museum of Modern Art in 1941. In addition, these articles and exhibitions were designed to stress the compatibility of Indian Art with modernism. According to Oliver LaFarge and John Sloan, who wrote the introductory essay in the catalogue that accompanied the 1941 MoMA show, the modernism of Indian

art had a natural symbolism, directness and strength that echoed the close relationship between form and function in modernist work.¹¹² Although there is no mention of his attendance at the show in 1941, Couturier's frequent correspondence and friendship with Jean Charlot would have exposed him to current discussions on Native American art. Charlot's deep interest in primitive art forms will be discussed later in this chapter.

Strong ties between the language of abstract elements and the primitive Native American art could be established. Important for Couturier, Native American art, as perceived by modernists, could provide a justification for finding spiritual value in abstraction. In 1938, Raymond Jonson along with the Hungarian exile Emil Bistram founded an exhibition society known as the Transcendental Painting Group. This was a group of abstract painters who endeavored to take painting beyond the appearance of the physical world through new concepts that were idealistic and spiritual.¹¹³ This was a testament to the essential and universal quality of Native American abstract art. Jonson had a commitment to a transcendent abstraction that expressed the immaterial and essential nature of spiritual experience, and he felt that abstract art was the "greatest innovation in plastic art during its entire history."¹¹⁴ Emil Bistram's primitivism has been associated with the search for a higher consciousness.¹¹⁵

The Indian Space Group¹¹⁹ included artists Will Barnet, Robert Barrell, Peter Busa, Howard Daum, Helen DeMott and Ruth Lewin among others who were also important in the development of American abstract painting. These artists were well versed in European modernist painting, but chose the flattened forms and sinuous lines of Northwest Coast Indian art as the inspiration for a new kind of abstract pictorial space. Although these painters were not indifferent to the ideas that tribal art provides access to

the unconscious mind, they were more interested in the structure as opposed to the process of tribal art.¹²⁰ For the Indian Space painters, the Indian space meant the unqualified respect for the two-dimensional character of the painting's surface and the equalization of the inside and outside of visual forms.¹²¹ Ann Gibson, who has done pioneering research on this movement, explains that these artists wanted to "draw the net of a seamless picture space as flat as a drum."¹²² Barnett and Busa are credited with being the first American painters to have consciously done away with the figure/ground effect in painting.¹²³ Primitive art awareness was keen and its influence was pervasive. Gibson goes on to point out that this group, although more linear, more geometric, and more abstract than the early Abstract Expressionists, were similar to the Abstract Expressionists in that they often created works that "display two-dimensionality and all-over composition – awareness eventually demonstrated also in the work of both the gestural and color field arms of the New York School."¹²⁴ At times, the Indian Space Painters and the Abstract Expressionists have been characterized as opposites, but they shared the commonplace belief that "the art of early cultures exhibited formal power and profound insights."¹²⁵ The real ideas and meaningful content of the present could be expressed with the sign language of primitive Native American art.

The Abstract Expressionists' involvement with Native American art can best be seen in their early work as these artists invented and manipulated signs from the Native American past for their own purposes. For these artists, intellectual and aesthetic justification on the role of myths, rituals, spiritual transformations, and the unconscious were important parts of their creations. These issues were predicated on their perceived need to redeem modern experience and the artist's function in that transformation.

Gottlieb explains: "If we profess a kinship to the art of primitive man, it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant."¹²⁶ From Richard Pousette-Dart's appraisal of his work as having an inner vibration comparable to American Indian art and thus a spiritual content accessible to anyone familiar with the "global language of art,"¹²⁷ to Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb's merging of Indian art with Greek themes and mythology, it is clear these artists saw forms and structures in primitive art that addressed life directly and made bearable the horrors of the war years.¹²⁸ It was not their motive to escape but to deal metaphysically with the present. Primitive forms were used for their ability to communicate universal experiences which Jung insisted were still extant in the unconscious mind.¹²⁹ The Native Art symbols became transfigured to take on new meaning that redeemed the darkness of the war years by bringing the atavistic roots of the modern experience to the surface.¹³⁰

Although Jackson Pollock had an appreciation for American Indian art that had its beginnings in his early life in the Southwest, he had a broad interest in the primitive art of other cultures.¹³¹ His activities in the 1930s were in line with Jean Charlot's comment that "serious students" would have already visited the art and anthropology collections at the American Museum of Natural History.¹³² His personal and psychological motivations drew him to the formal power and mythic content of Indian art. His established and deep involvement with Native American art led him to accept John Graham's conclusion about primitive art and the unconscious mind. Pollock's interest in the unconscious was the Jungian call for a spiritual transformation of modern man by merging the unconscious and conscious mind.¹³³ Through the manipulation of primitive art, Pollock could reach a

world beyond ordinary perception. The similarities between the sand painter's process and Pollock's drip paintings are clear: both are flat linear images produced in a freehand manner directly onto the flat ground or canvas without preliminary drawings in a move away from overt representation. Pollock's statement, "I am nature,"¹³⁴ may in part refer to his observation that Native Americans were people who found nature in themselves rather than viewing nature as a motif. Abstract forms could symbolize the essential forces of nature. Pollock, like the rest of the Abstract Expressionists, sought themes of universal relevance and derived his forms from a transformation of Native American images and processes to incorporate this ancient art into Abstract Expressionism.

Intellectual Life

A heightened awareness of Native American art at this time was due to two things, the many exhibitions and writings about Native art and the intellectual life in the 1930s. Artists, curators, and dealers who often functioned as critics and theorists added to the integration of Indian art into modernist painting. Discussions covering the spiritual function of art, consciousness, myth, and ritual interacted with the theories of Jung and Nietzsche and the belief that the tragic world was still redeemable through art. Thus the conscious manipulation to make Native American art an essential influence in the development of American modern art grew from the perception that Indian art expressed deeply-rooted traditions or truths that were manifest in a universal collective unconscious. Perhaps the spiritual crisis created by the failure of modernism to generate a better social and political environment led artists to reach beyond the present and immediate past to search out these universal values.

One of the most well-versed artists who saw atavistic myths and primitivism as an avenue to the unconscious mind and primordial past was John Graham.¹³⁵ Graham stressed the spiritual quality of Indian art, and helped the artist to understand how myth, totem, and ritual relate to Jungian thought. His ideas and subsequent influence on the Indian Space Group and Abstract Expressionists can be seen in their work. By the early 1940s Graham was able to announce, "I am an expert on Prehistoric, African, Oceanic, Mexican-Precolumbian, and North American Indian, as well as Modern and Antique art in general."¹³⁶ His acquaintances included Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Arshille Gorky, Wilhelm de Kooning, and Richard Pousette-Dart, among others.¹³⁷ He was knowledgeable, worldly and charismatic.¹³⁸ It was Graham's book, *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937) that became central to the New York artists' understanding of primitive art, including not only a comprehensive history of modern art, but the ideas and languages of Jungian psychology as well.¹³⁹ *System and Dialectics of Art* suggested that art was a way of penetrating and analyzing the primordial past because it offered "an almost unlimited access to one's unconscious."¹⁴⁰ Graham had also published an article on primitive art and Picasso in 1937 that was a more explicit discussion of primitive art as an expression of the unconscious mind.¹⁴¹ Graham emphasized Jung's dichotomies between conscious and unconscious mind and between modern and primitive culture. To Graham, the unconscious was "the creative factor and the storehouse of power and of all knowledge, past and future."¹⁴² Both of these texts suggest that Indian art had a powerful role to play in a spiritual transformation of modern experience through the merging of the conscious and unconscious mind, and both of these texts were part of the intellectual milieu in New York at the time. Wolfgang Paalen, who was associated with Andre

Breton's circle and was aware of Jungian thought, believed, like Graham, that art could reunite us with our prehistoric past.¹⁴³

But perhaps the most important link between Native American art and Couturier was the artist Jean Charlot. Charlot was born in Paris in 1898 of French and Spanish descent.¹⁴⁴ He was educated at the *Lycée Condorcet* and studied informally at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Like Couturier, Charlot was interested in liturgical work and did a series of liturgical drawings, *Chemin de Croix*, while he served in the army in World War I. These drawings were later cut into woodcuts and shown at an exhibition of liturgical arts held at the *Louvre* in 1920. As a teen, Charlot was a member of a Catholic group, the *Gilde Notre Dame*, made up of sculptors, stained glass makers, and other artists. In the 1920s, he traveled and painted in Mexico, producing a series of small woodcuts and oils primarily of portraits. He became an assistant to Diego Rivera and worked on mural paintings on the walls of public buildings. In 1923, he participated in his first independent group exhibition in New York. After more extended travel in Mexico, Charlot and his mother moved to New York in 1928. Charlot's work was shown in the Mexican government-sponsored group exhibition and in a retrospective at the Art Students League in 1930. In the same year, he illustrated *The Book of Christopher Columbus*, a book by his friend Paul Claudel, who served as the French ambassador to the United States from 1927-33. This would be just the one of many future book illustrations. From 1931-32, Charlot taught at the Art Students League and painted portraits and Mexican and religious scenes. He taught at the Chouinard School of Art, Florence Cane School of Art at Rockefeller Center, and lectured at Columbia University and the Brooklyn Museum. For his exhibitions of religious paintings held at the

Bonestell Gallery in New York in 1941,¹⁴⁵ he asked his friend Father Couturier to prepare a lecture on his art. Continuing to teach, write, publish, and create lithographs, sculpture, and murals all over the United States, Charlot and his family made Hawaii their permanent home in 1949.

Building on their previous friendship, Jean and Zohmah Charlot wrote steadily to Couturier during his stay in America and even after his return to France.¹⁴⁶ Charlot had painted four portraits of Father Couturier, one of which is in the collection of the Vatican. Father Couturier was the godfather of one of the Charlots' sons, baptizing him on June 23, 1941 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.¹⁴⁷

In light of the friendship between Charlot and Couturier as Frenchmen and exiles in America, it would not be improbable to assume that there was a mutual influence. During 1941 when Charlot was artist-in-residence at the University of Georgia, he entrusted Couturier to lecture about his art in a show in New York City. From the lecture, Couturier writes that Charlot "...instead of speaking himself about his own work, he left me the care to do that with my poor English..."¹⁴⁸ What was important for Couturier and for this dissertation is Charlot's conviction that Native American art was one of the sources of our own modern style. In regard to the aesthetics of Indian art, Charlot states that "the greatest thrust of the Indian mind, the language it chooses to exalt its clan pride, wield magic power, or address the gods, is the language of abstract art."¹⁴⁹ Couturier had the utmost respect for Charlot as both artist and friend as he referred to "his [Charlot's] constant will to understand anything and to discover the best of everything."¹⁵⁰ It would not be difficult for Couturier to understand Charlot's attraction to primitive art since he was aware of Charlot's strong feelings toward Mexican primitive

art: "the simplicity and purity, this very simple and intimate connection between a man and his work...is found in the Mexican Mayan art this strength."¹⁵¹ Additionally important for Couturier was Charlot's belief that Native America art could illustrate without departing from the organic world: "the 'abstract' art of the Northwest [*Indian*] is more deeply realistic than is the formula for reality in our art. ...because the painting sums up the knowledge acquired through all the senses and his brain: while the white man is satisfied that he represents a creature when all he describes is its outer bag of skin."¹⁵² Charlot concludes his assessment by pointing out that the spiritual content of the Indian work, perfectly balanced between objective conventions and individual genius, is one of classical integrity.¹⁵³ Even though each generation of avant-garde modernists might "flirt with what in the vast and complex body of aboriginal art approximates its fancy," the best Indian art always transcended "such modish standards."¹⁵⁴

In 1941, Couturier wrote that "reality" should have features perceptible to the senses that are within our reach. Hence his interest in the form and the need to engage in the experience. Experience should include all aspects of life, for "there is heroism, [even] a violence in the true faith."¹⁵⁵ He is against soothing or soporific atmospheres with ready-made emotions since there is no truth here.¹⁵⁶ Even the Catholic Church recognizes the importance of experiencing the divine sacraments over mere learning or theology. This engagement with reality, often harsh and violent, coincides with Couturier's evolving aesthetic thoughts. For Couturier, a truly classical art is an art of perpetual revolution. What Couturier meant by revolutionary was the discretion and humility of a Corot. For Couturier, changes in the stylistic formal properties of painting also caused a new departure in thought, feelings and principles. Technical procedures or

material changes were not mere formal changes, but introduced completely new concepts of the artwork. Hence their radical nature, and the failure of the public and uninitiated to understand or appreciate their significant revolutionary life-force. Unfortunately, the hostility of some of the members of the Catholic hierarchy in Paris and Rome to the incomprehensibility of modern art continued, all in the name of tradition.

Considering the presence of Native American art and its modern appropriation by abstract artists in New York art journals, galleries, and museums after 1930, it seems unlikely that Couturier would not have assimilated this visual and textual information into his consciousness and integrated it with his evolving aesthetic theories. Although he may not have seen the results of all the developments, he was present during a time of active debate, experimentation, and perpetual self-questioning. He was present at the development of the New York art scene as modernist artists borrowed and transformed the ideas, forms and processes of primitive Native American art to create a unique American painting style that became universal.

Couturier's link to the art development in America was complex. He maintained contact with European exiles like Amédée Ozenfant, Fernand Léger, Henri Focillon, and Jacques Maritain for established modernist trends while witnessing the movement in America to thrust Native American art to the forefront. Native American art was seen in a new light due to scholarly writings and artistic appropriations. That art was now being recognized for its artistic merits, and not seen merely as craft. Importantly, its lack of contextualization made it possible to use the artifacts in an abstract system.

A further factor that enabled Couturier to view abstract forms as appropriate for religious art was his friendship with Fernand Léger. Although they did not know each

other before World War II, Couturier was respectful of Léger's art, and by the time of Couturier's passing, they had enjoyed a deep friendship together. Léger states that "...*la disparition du R. P. Couturier est pour moi celle d'un ami très cher et d'un collaborateur artistique précieux et toujours présent.*"¹⁵⁷ Léger went to America for a second time in 1940, and like Couturier, spent the war years there. Léger continued to paint and lecture in and out of New York City. Léger talks of this: "But during these years in America [1940-1945] I do feel I have worked with a greater intensity and achieved more expression than in my previous work... The American period of my painting has certainly been different from the French... What has come out most notable in the work I have done in America is, in my opinion, a new energy."¹⁵⁸

From 1941-1945, Léger had shows and exhibitions in New York at Paul Rosenberg & Company, the Valentine Gallery, Jacques Seligmann & Company, and Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.¹⁵⁹ From the large canvases of the *Plongeurs* series to *Les Belles Cyclistes* (1944) to *Big Julie* (1945), Couturier was able to see Léger's work and most importantly, the independent role he gave to color and form. Léger had separated color from his forms and then laid the color prominently over areas to form a separate composition that tied the painting all together. Color was no longer descriptive, but flowed in and out of existing linear figures for a tranquil but forceful interaction. Clement Greenberg describes this tranquility: "Later on, Léger will be able to secure unity only by elimination and drastic simplification... then a mass calm, the calm that always supervenes in great painting."¹⁶⁰ Couturier himself made essentially the same observation regarding Léger and the characteristics of religious art.¹⁶¹

The materialism in America that Léger so willingly embraced was ironically the very mechanism that allowed Couturier to see abstract art as capable of spirituality. Greenberg says of Léger: "Of all the optimists, materialists and yea-sayers, none was, or has remained, more whole-heartedly one than Fernand Léger."¹⁶² John Berger also states that Léger "...expressed directly the profound humanism of his materialistic philosophy."¹⁶³ It was through the use of machine parts and other forms of modernity that Léger was able to project a direct expression of emotion. Quoting Greenberg again, "But what a mistake it would be not to see how much else there is in this art [Léger's], which has succeeded better, I dare say, than any other in making the rawness of matter wholly relevant to the human feeling."¹⁶⁴ John Berger reiterates: "Léger was unique because he seized upon our technical achievements and concentrating on their real nature was led on to discover the spirit, the ethics, the attitude of mind, necessary to control and exploit them to our full advantage."¹⁶⁵

For Couturier, Léger's vibrant colors and grand forms of solemnity directly appealed to the senses, the divine. Through Léger's use of color and form, the plastic form could transport the viewer to a spiritual realm. Léger's colors became a living force, the energy, which could have transformative powers, for Léger believed that society can be transformed through the use of color.¹⁶⁶ Léger believed that every formal development in art was followed by a human development and an offer of freedom. His paintings incorporate all the formal discoveries of modern art and yet are classic, suggesting order.¹⁶⁷ For the first time Couturier could recognize a religious element in abstract art, for in abstract art, nothing is hidden, whereas in representational art, "the pious subject disguises the absence of religious inspiration - of the religious essence - of

the work in itself”¹⁶⁸ In Léger’s forms, the religious element did not depend on its representation of a sacred subject, but on the quality of its plastic form.

Like Couturier, Léger was also concerned with the eradication of kitsch, but he saw a solution through a movement toward replacement of quantity for quality.¹⁶⁹ Léger’s art had such a profound effect on Couturier that he wrote in an article on Léger, “that quality [from Léger’s art] comes directly from heart and soul of the artist, like architecture and music.”¹⁷⁰ After this point, Couturier began to see abstraction not only as a possibility for religious art but as a necessity. By eliminating the natural representation or picturesque elements, the viewer would be freed to access the divine. In 1937, Couturier had rejected abstraction as appropriate for religious art in “*Sur Picasso et les conditions actuelles de l’art chrétien*,” but he reversed his position in 1945 when he wrote “*Notes Sur l’Abstraction*.”

Henri Laugier, a renowned physiologist who was also the assistant secretary general of the United Nations at this time, had met Couturier in the late 1940’s in Canada. Laugier was an enthusiastic admirer of modern art, a friend of Picasso’s and he is also credited for persuading Couturier to change his hostile view of non-figurative art and to recognize the religious potentialities of abstract art.¹⁷¹ “Laugier urged Couturier to reconsider his views regarding abstract art.”¹⁷²

When Couturier returned to France in 1945, he was energized by his American exile and took a more critical stand to resist the mediocre religious art being produced as sacred art. He openly discussed issues of sacred art in articles and lectures and took bold steps while directing the art commissioning for pilgrimage churches at Assy, Vence, Audincourt and Ronchamp. For the last five years, he had been immersed in America’s

art scene. Adopting America's respect for primitive arts, Couturier wrote upon his return to France that the perfection of forms in native arts cannot be lost since "neither moral decay nor aberration of beliefs can contaminate it."¹⁷³ Echoing artistic modernist ideas, he embraced primitive art as a truly sacred art: "This is an art in which, with no care whatever for beauty or for realistic representation, the character given to forms and deformations had as its exclusive purpose the expression of the sacred mystery and its direct action upon the senses and the imagination."¹⁷⁴ And like the American artists, Couturier sees primitive art as possessing a universality such that contact with this art will lead to growth.¹⁷⁵

But perhaps the most important lesson Couturier learned from his American experience is the value of freedom. What is held in common for both primitive and modern artists is their freedom to create and to express. In America it was a free direct response to the environment. This links the past with a future. Couturier writes: "Boundaries ought to be crossed. National boundaries, of course; but first of all the boundaries of the imagination and sensibility, which wall us in when we think we are so free."¹⁷⁶ This is what convinced Couturier that abstract art forms, an art freed from traditional representation, can be used in the Church. For Couturier, abstract art was now seen as part of a modern art phenomena that had a two-fold break with the past. The first break was with the contemporary academic traditions canonized by the official *Écoles* and which were nothing "but sterile recipes and formulas that no longer had any validity."¹⁷⁷ The second and more important break addressed freedom. The essential function of art changed from the representation of reality to the creation of a new reality, an act requiring freedom. This freedom set apart and emancipated the world of forms. It

was the victory of freedom of forms over the laws and bondages of realistic imitation. Abstract art is defined by Couturier as art without representation. But the essential character of the revolution is not representation versus non-representation, but rather the perfection of freedom. Artists take things from the external world and them with absolute freedom. Freedom is the source of the revolutionary power of this new art. The continual renewal of the forms of expression is the law of living art, and that is why the principle of absolute freedom is a fundamental necessity.

What, then, can be said about the importance of the American exile for Couturier? It was clear from the start that Couturier was immersed in the problem of sacred art. Recognizing that the present art in the Catholic Church was not only ineffectual, but even offensive to his sensibilities, Couturier knew a change was in order. Trained as an artist, Couturier was not ignorant of the development of modern art in France. He knew which artists were considered the greatest masters of art, and he was familiar with current art trends. But it was during his five years in America that he was able to grapple with the artistic issues with a sense of freedom unknown to him before his exile. It was not that Couturier, prior to his New York exile, was against abstract art *per se*, but his concern was whether or not abstract art was appropriate for sacred art. This was no simple question, but a complex issue involving traditional teachings of the Church, questions of artistic form and its purpose, and the mounting pressures and demands of the modern world. It was a question that had to be reconciled satisfactorily within spiritual, social, political, and artistic contexts. When Couturier returned to France, he was free from doubt or confusion: abstract forms were the most appropriate forms for sacred art.

Couturier was present in America during a very important time in its art history. He experienced the development of America's contribution to the international art scene. Abstract Expressionism. Amid the chaotic and rapidly changing times that reached even America, he witnessed American artists struggle to overcome regionalism for a more universal language. The resultant universal language was a language that, ironically, reached back to primitive times, but spoke on an unconscious level that was understood by all people. But what was more important for Couturier was that these primitive forms were abstract and also the most spiritual of forms. Hence abstract forms could be sacred forms. The second justification for abstract forms was their inherent universality. Because it was not representative art, it was not regional, and understanding was therefore not restricted to any time or place. This meant that the forms would be meaningful to all worshippers. This was a type of democracy and openness that resonated with Couturier's sense of social responsibility.

This type of American democracy and justice was further reinforced by the sacred art movement in the American Catholic Church. Couturier witnessed the American Catholics struggle to make the Church more meaningful in its use of art in its structure, its decoration, and its liturgical program. A contrast was seen. While the sacred art movement in France was one that was started by the clergy, it was the laity in America that instigated the demands for art reform. It was a more democratic approach to reform. Although the French brought democracy to the people, the Americans tried to insure its citizens practiced these values. Unlike Kandinsky's earlier use of spirituality to transcend the world, Mondrian and Couturier's attitude was to cope with the world. Couturier had come to realize that abstract forms could not only speak to people's

spiritual needs but could also democratize the Church. The adoption of abstract forms seemed to Couturier the best way to reach his goals.

Endnotes

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4. John Polkinghorne, Anglican priest and Cambridge University particle physicist, quoted in "Science and Religion: Bridging the Great Divide," *New York Times* 30 June 1998, F4.
5. Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, (South Bend, Indiana: Jacques Maritain Center, 1996) 5. This book is a compilation of Maritain's remarks at a seminar organized by the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, 6-9 Nov. 1956.
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10. Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 273.
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13. Couturier, unpublished diaries (1940).
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15. Couturier, *Art and Politics* 8.
16. Dorothy Washburn, "Toward a theory of structural style in art," *Structure and cognition in Art*, ed. Dorothy Washburn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 1.
17. Couturier, *Art and Politics* 8.
18. Focillon's book was first published in Paris in 1938. A more recent republication is *L'Art d'Occident*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1983).
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21. Couturier, *Art and Politics* 1.

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25. Couturier, *Art and Politics* 5.
26. Couturier, *Art and Politics* 1.
27. Marie-Alain Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1957) 43.
28. Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle* 65.
29. Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle*.
30. Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle* 66.
31. Elizabeth Sergeant, "A New Deal for the Indian," *The New Republic* 15 June 1938: 151.
32. John Collier, "Does the Government Welcome the Indian Arts?" *American Magazine of Art* XXVII Supplement, Sep. 1934: 234.
33. Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Crossroad Publications, 1998) 45–47. First published in 1930 by Sheed & Ward in London.
34. Susan J. White, *Art, Architecture, and Liturgical Reform: The Liturgical Arts Society (1929-1972)* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1990).
35. White 3.
36. Father Pié-Raymond Régamey was co-editor with Couturier of the journal *L'Art Sacré* from 1937 to 1954.
37. White vii.
38. Ryan, unpublished notes.
39. Americanism was a movement begun in the 1890's initially to unite the German and Irish elements in the Catholic Church and to move into the mainstream of American life, but ultimately its aim was to reconcile the Church with modernism. It was seen by Church conservatives as heretical liberalism. See Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 335.
40. Charles Lippy, ed., *Religious Periodicals of the United States: Academic and Scholarly Journals* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) xi.
41. Lippy 499.
42. Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982) 193.
43. James Hennesey, *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981) 198.
44. Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victoria America: 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 89. But by the 1880's Catholic Bible reading did become more acceptable and was promoted to counter the influence of the Protestant Bible societies.

45. McDannell 89.
46. Allitt, Patrick. *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997) 101.
47. Allitt 101.
48. Lippy xi.
49. Note the heterogeneous nature of the religious press at this time. Lippy xv.
50. Lippy xvii.
51. Lippy 154.
52. Roger Van Allen, *The Commonweal and American Catholicism: The Magazine, the Movement, the Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 1-14.
53. Lippy 154.
54. Lippy 154.
55. Van Allen 12-14.
56. Thomas T. Love, *John Courtney Murray: Contemporary Church-State Theory* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) 62.
57. White 14.
58. White 58.
59. White 58.
60. White 59.
61. White 61.
62. Due to an internal struggle within the hierarchy of the French Church, the conservative faction, the Integrists, convince the Vatican to authorize the removal of the *Crucifixion* by Germaine Richier on the grounds that it is not "appropriate art for the Church." This is in spite of the fact that the Pope had initially given a personal purse for the project. This was a highly controversial event, even mentioned in the *Liturgical Arts* journal by Lavanoux. An entire issue was devoted to the Church at Assy and Father Couturier.
63. White 81.
64. White 66.
65. White 85.
66. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, *Exiles and Émigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (New York: Abrams, 1997) 14. This is the catalog from a show held at the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art.
67. Michele Cone, *Artists Under the Vichy: A Case of Prejudiced Persecution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992) 12.

68. Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) ix.
69. Golan 6.
70. Golan 3, 18.
71. Barron and Eckmann 20.
72. Barnes 32.
73. Couturier, *Truth Wounded*, trans. Granger Ryan (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1991) 70.
74. Couturier, *Truth Wounded*, 22.
75. Couturier, *Truth Wounded*, 39.
76. Ryan, unpublished notes, 5.
77. Couturier, *Truth Wounded*, 14.
78. Couturier, unpublished diaries, 67
79. Dominique de Menil, notes for an unpublished speech given at the dedication of the Couturier Collection, School of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts, Yale University, 9 Feb. 1992.
80. de Menil 15
81. Couturier, *Art et liberté spirituelle*, 135-138.
82. de Menil 11
83. Calvin Tomkins, "The Benefactor," *New York Magazine* 8 June 1998: 54.
84. Tomkins 56-58.
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CHAPTER IV

The Church at Assy

The twentieth century was rough on democratic states. Several European countries were under siege by totalitarian dictatorships; there was gross inequality and spiritual vacancy. The century started in an optimistic mood about the future of democracy, but WWI showed that democracy could not guarantee peace, and the Great Depression showed democracy could not guarantee prosperity. The economic collapse of the 1930s increased the appeal of totalitarian creeds. The twentieth century was a century of destruction, but at the same time it was a century of liberation and of creativity. The arts flourished. Arthur Schlesinger¹

Couturier returned from America and brought the liberation and creativity of modern art to the Church at Assy in a postwar period in France that was full of contradictions, ambiguities, and intense emotions.² In spite of the war and a period under the Vichy government, the art culture had continued to survive, especially in Paris. The Germans wanted to project a normalized image of life and allowed Matisse, Bonnard, Braque, and Picasso to continue to exhibit in private galleries and semi-official positions without compromising their political positions.³ Furthermore, many of the issues and much of the thought Couturier had encountered in America were also debated in France. In a period of reconstruction, artists wanted an authenticity, a return to origins. Couturier witnessed a return to origins in the American embrace of primitive art. The problem between realism and abstraction that had been the vital issue with American artists continued to be equally significant in France.⁴ As abstraction was attacked for being “illegible and aimed for the highly educated bourgeoisie” by the Socialists in France,⁵ artists were turning away from representation and a literal description of the world in the

aftermath of war and the Holocaust.⁶ Couturier had a different understanding of the issue of abstraction and realism. For Couturier, realistic or imitative representation was null or limited in meaning while an abstraction of forms was an act of freedom for creativity and life. Imitative representation was academic, and Couturier's struggle against the academy echoed postwar France's struggle against the old order, whether it was social, political or cultural. Abstraction for Couturier was not necessarily totally devoid of figuration, but was a process of shedding academic values like the imitation of nature or an accepted hierarchy of subject matter. Golan sees Couturier as the worker priest reclaiming France through his desire for public modernism.⁷ Thus Couturier's desire to reestablish the Church's authority through its art program would unwittingly force the Church to confront pressing issues, but it would ultimately reanimate the life of the Church. Couturier's inclusion of modern art forms in the religious decoration of the church is the topic of this chapter.

Sacred art movement

Many world religions include paintings, sculpture or other art objects as part of their programs or rituals. Art translates into visual imagery what it means to be human, while religion remains the spiritual inspiration for creativity that binds humanity and divinity through ritual and mythology. Works of art can capture the meaning or essence of a ritual or religious experience and freeze it into form and thus allow for the repetition of the original ritual or religious experience.

Increased interest in contemporary religious art is perhaps inevitable in the aftermath of war. After World War I, there were manifestations of a new spirituality

among painters. Changes in ecclesiastical architecture and improvement of devotional accessories were both proposed. One of the early groups was the *Ateliers de l'Art Sacré* (1918), started by Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières under the patronage of the Catholic Institute of Paris. Denis and Desvallières believed that the creation of a truly religious art requires spiritual preparation. But a more lasting influence was Denis' dictum that a painting is "a two dimensional surface covered with colors arranged in a particular order."⁸ That dictum argued for the primacy of plastic over literary values, paving the way for reconsidering the problem of religious art from the aesthetic point of view. Couturier, as we have seen, was a member of the clergy, the organized institutionalized Church, and a trained artist from Denis' workshop.

The Dominicans were active in the Sacred Art Movement and were also known as the clerical avant-garde. This order advocated personal contact with real social and intellectual problems of the French masses. They believed such contact rehabilitated the vital spirit of the Church. The unique structure of the Dominican constitution, loosely constructed along egalitarian lines with power from the bottom up, was the opposite of the hierarchy of the Vatican. The Dominicans had worker-priests, and they wanted a religion that would be socially involved. Couturier wanted to bring the same spirit of missionary engagement and openness to new ideas to his attempt to reanimate sacred art. Under his directorship at Assy, he wanted "the artists to have full liberty, no restrictive censorship, especially in our times of conformism and intellectual regimentation."⁹ After his exile in America, he felt he could achieve this goal with modern art forms.

This chapter will discuss selective postwar European religious art that had been commissioned by the French Catholic Church. Inclusion of non-commissioned art with

religious subject matter that was shown in secular galleries, exhibitions, or salons will be brought up only for purposes of elucidation or comparison.¹⁰ The focus of this chapter's discussion will be first, a general discussion of selected art works commissioned by Couturier for a small pilgrimage church, Nôtre Dame du Toute Grâce at Assy in the French Alps. This will be followed by a more concentrated examination of one commission in particular, the crucifix by Germaine Richier. This church provided the first opportunity after his American exile for Couturier to put his changed aesthetics to the test, and it was these works of art that inadvertently brought religious, political, and art issues to public scrutiny.

The selected artworks at Assy church that will be described in this chapter were, individually, not necessarily considered outstanding examples of the finest art produced either by the participating artists or in the postwar period.¹¹ However, the church at Assy is important for two reasons. First, Nôtre Dame du Toute Grâce became the testing ground for Father Couturier's post-America aesthetic theories that now preferred abstract art forms. Second, and of equal significance, Assy's art program shed light on the disdain for modern art that had been shared by the church hierarchy and the Nazis. The artists who contributed to Nôtre Dame du Toute Grâce created controversy because the modern styles they used faced strong opposition.

The Church at Assy

In a daring move, Father Marie-Alain Couturier, an artist and Dominican priest, included Jews, non-practicing Catholics, and members of the Communist Party among the artists commissioned to develop the sacred art program at the Nôtre Dame du Toute

Grâce.¹² Among those commissioned were Marc Chagall, Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger, Germaine Richier, Pierre Bonnard and Georges Rouault.

What makes this ecumenical endeavor even more extraordinary is that it took place during a time of shifting relationships among state, church, and social institutions. From 1939-1950, emboldened by his exile in America, Couturier faced open opposition by both church and state when he rejected standard sacred art procedures and commissioned artists based on their artistic sensibility rather than their religious persuasion. However, he had been encouraged by pre-nineteenth century standards of art commissions for the Church. In 1947 he wrote that although all great bishops and popes in the past had “called on the help of the greatest artists of our time,” they knew they were not all practicing Christians and “some [*artists*] were separated from us by serious divergences of a political as well as of an intellectual order.”¹³ But from that time until the present, there had been a steady decline in the quality of artwork for the Church, and it was Couturier’s goal to bring back quality artwork that would ultimately revitalize the Church.

The artists selected by Couturier worked in modern art forms, forms that clearly defied Church Canon Laws 1279 and 1399 and fit Hitler’s definition of degenerate art. But after his American exile, Couturier was convinced that the most important revitalization factor for the Church was the inclusion of modern art forms, especially abstract non-imitative forms. The mixed reactions to these commissions made it clear that issues of sacred art were also political. To trace the history of the Church at Assy is to gain a more thorough understanding of the role of art in the postwar period.

The Assy Church, located on the slope of the mountainside close to the Chamonix resort area, serves the tuberculosis sanatoria located at the Plateau d'Assy, and was begun in 1937. Construction was interrupted by the war but was resumed afterwards by Abbé Devémy, chaplain of one of the sanatoriums. Devémy was familiar with the Haute Savoie area because of his own tubercular ailment. Notre Dame du Toute Grâce was consecrated in 1950 by the Bishop of Annecy. In March 1939, Canon Devémy had asked Couturier to direct the decoration of the church.¹⁴ At the end of 1939, Couturier left France for the United States, and the Assy project was put on hold until Couturier returned to France in 1945. When he returned, it was Couturier's plan to have the great artists of the age collaborate in a religious endeavor. It was not Couturier's plan to rival the works of art in Chartres or in Reims, "but to inspire a new direction that was as old as the church herself through artists that were not shackled to the past, but showed freedom and dignity."¹⁵

Maurice Novarina was the chosen architect. He was a resident of the Haute Savoie area and specialized in ecclesiastical structures. Novarina was selected by Abbé Devémy who was familiar and respectful of Novarina's work: "J'avais remarqué et apprécié les églises de Novarina à Vougy et surtout au Fayet."¹⁶

The Assy church is a solid building with small apertures, anchored to the earth, functionally designed to meet the tremendous snows and winds of the mountain (fig. 2). The exterior material used is the green granite stone of the region, and the frontal triangular face is broken by eight massive stone columns varying in height according to the slant of the roof. The massive pillars are non-supportive, but do allow for a five-meter overhang of the roof and provide a vertical foil for the low-slung body of the

church to relieve the ponderous aspect of the building. On the flat wall is a mosaic by Fernand Léger (fig. 3). To the right of the entrance, the simple Campanile rises thirty-two meters from the platform, dominating the Savoyard-style or slanted roof.

Many of the commissioned artists for the façade and the interior art decoration had never done religious work.¹⁷ Some were Catholics, but some were actually hostile to the Catholic religion. More importantly, most of the artists involved had a record of outstanding individual work. When Couturier returned to France, he had come to believe that the artist's religious beliefs were not a major concern. What was important was employing the right art, art that would revitalize the Church. It was not the source of the art, but its effect on worshippers that was important. In 1949, Couturier wrote that he welcomed all artists, whatever state of their faith: "We start with the assumption that artists are men and therefore sinners. ...all of them spring from our culture and even our religion...when some think themselves communists, it is out of love for the poor. They will tell our story as it has not been told in 500 years."¹⁸ He went on to write after his American exile: "If we appealed to the greatest independent artists, it was not out of snobism – because they were the most famous and the more advanced – but because they were the most alive, because of them, life, and the gift and the greatest chances abounded....this overflowing life, violent, the mad generosity of modern art was to be accepted... This is Assy's true lesson, its only lesson."¹⁹ Couturier believed that raising the quality of the art in the Church would revitalize the Church; hence it was necessary to commission significant artists.

The artists and works that will be described include Demaison and his wood carvings, Fernand Léger and his mosaic on the façade, the five stained glass windows by

Georges Rouault, the bronze work by Jacques Lipchitz, the ceramic mural, plaster bas-relief, and two stained glass windows by Marc Chagall, the ceramic mural by Henri Matisse, the metal bas-relief by Georges Braque, the oil painting by Pierre Bonnard, the tapestry by Jean Lurçat, the stained glass windows by Jean Rene Bazin, and the bronze crucifix by Germaine Richier. The collective works follow no consistent iconographic scheme related to the liturgy but are more individualistic since the subjects were determined jointly by the individual artists and Father Couturier (fig. 4). Because the bronze crucifix by Richier created the most controversy, this work and its implications will be discussed more in detail.

Abbé Devémy worked together with Father Couturier in securing the commissions for the Assy Church. Before the war, Abbé Devémy had secured Georges Rouault to do several stained glass windows and had also approached Pierre Bonnard to do a painting of Saint Francis de Sales, the patron saint of the area. Bonnard was an agnostic with no particular contact with the Church or the history of the saint in mind, but after a period of months decided to accept.²⁰ Of the five Rouault windows at Assy, one was already made, and the rest were translations of paintings selected later by Rouault and Father Couturier for their suitability.²¹ For a portrait of St. Dominic, Picasso was the first choice since both artist and saint were Spanish. But when Devémy visited Picasso in his studio in Paris, he was embarrassed by Picasso's style of painting and later commissioned Matisse for St. Dominic.²² The next commission was Georges Braque for the door of the tabernacle. Father Couturier spoke with Braque and he accepted; "Braque a accepté volontiers de la réaliser."²³ Germaine Richier was commissioned next. Richier was visiting her niece at the sanatorium of Sancellemoz in the Assy area when Father

Couturier asked her to collaborate on the Assy project. She agreed, and although she was an atheist and had never made a religious figure, Couturier still suggested the crucifix as her subject.²⁴ She answered: "Jamais je n'aurais accepté l'oeuvre que vous ma'avez confiée, si dans mon coeur il u avail eu un doute. J'ai toujours été croyante."²⁵ Couturier proceeded to enlist Léger, Lipchitz and Chagall in America and then commissioned Lurçat in France. When first approached in 1939, Lurçat refused, but when it was offered to him again in 1944, he accepted after a year and long talks with Couturier. Lurçat did not think he was a proper choice as he was not in the least religious.²⁶ When Couturier suggested the Apocalypse as the theme of the tapestry, Lurçat replied: "C'est formidable, toute ma vie j'ai attendu un tel sujet."²⁷ In a letter to Couturier later, he added "Toute ma vie j'attendais un pareil projet."²⁸

Couturier had developed a deep friendship with Léger during their wartime exile in America, and when they returned to France, Léger assured Father Couturier that they would "do a church together."²⁹ Léger agreed to the subject of the litany of the Virgin because the text refers to various symbolic objects.³⁰ In 1947, after Father Couturier had returned to America, he approached Lipchitz about the commission. Lipchitz agreed to the commission provided he could place a special inscription on the work. Four months later Couturier accepted Lipchitz's acceptance and proviso eagerly.³¹ Father Couturier became friends with Chagall during their American exile and when, in 1948, Couturier spoke to him about his project at Assy, Chagall agreed. Chagall's long friendship with Jacques and Raissa Maritain influenced his decision to accept.³²

The Artworks at Assy

Léger restates sacrosanct iconography through a personalized style in the façade. Léger was prolific in many media and went through different stylistic changes, but he articulated a consistent position on the role of art in society. He went from Cubist-derived abstraction in 1910 to realist imagery in the 1950s. In 1908 he began to frequent avant-garde gatherings, meeting Delaunay, Chagall, Soutine, and Jacques Lipchitz as well as the poet Max Jacob, Apollinaire, and Cendrars.

Léger posited that pictorial contrasts used in their purest sense (complementary color, lines, and forms) were the structural basis of modern art. His career was influenced by his experience serving in World War I. He felt he had encountered ordinary people and wanted his art to be relevant to them. Aware of the rapid changes in life that were unsettling society, he wanted his art to conform to the pace of the world. The machine became for him a fluid embodiment of strength and power. He was fascinated with the dynamism of Paris and the visual landscape of advertising, kiosks, and illuminated signs. The figure reappeared in his work in 1920 as he invoked classicism to find monumental figures, paralleling Picasso. He worked on ballets, set design, film, and architectural projects, all of which contributed to his growing interest in mural painting and large-scale works. His interest in film led him to place special interest in close-ups, the isolated object, and the juxtapositioning of single objects with unrelated ones to produce jarring contrasts. The objects were rendered flat, with strong contours against simple decorative planes. In 1924, he founded with Ozenfant the *Académie de l'art moderne*. In the 1930s, he supported the left-wing Popular Front, which came to power in 1936. Léger painted in the U.S. from 1940-45, during which time his friendship

with Father Couturier deepened. Couturier was profoundly influenced by Léger, as he wrote in *“La forme humain dans l’espace.”*³³ Léger also acknowledges a long friendship with Couturier: *“...la disparition du R.P. Couturier est pour moi celle d’un ami très cher et d’un collaborateur artistique précieux et toujours présent.”*³⁴ After his return to France in 1945, Léger, acting on a long time interest in mural painting and collaborative works, completed several public presentations in large-scale, prominently placed works: 1946 at Audincourt, France, 1953 at Courfaivre, Switzerland, and in 1955 at the Gaz de France Building in Paris.³⁵ Murals were seen as the modern monument that worked directly to loosen habits of thought chaining the ordinary man to a subservient past.³⁶ Since murals have had revolutionary overtones, these large works and paintings, like those of Pollock and the Mexican artists Siqueros and Orozco, reflect Léger’s more evident political interest in the working class.³⁷ Murals, the fusion of the aesthetic with the political in the billboard, offered a new gaze for mass audiences.³⁸

Léger did not officially join the communist party until 1945, and participated vigorously after 1946. In the 1950s, he began to work in new media: stained glass, ceramics, and mosaics. By this point, he had channeled his efforts toward decidedly public presentations through large-scale, prominently placed works. In his experiments with other media, his interest was seldom purely technical. In most cases, his choice of a particular medium was based on its suitability for the monumental public display of his pre-conceived designs. Léger’s socialist allegiances are revealed in his preference for mural painting over easel painting.³⁹ Furthermore, his pure colors and forms are derived from popular culture, thus making his works even more accessible to all people.⁴⁰

The forty-two foot long front façade of the Assy church was originally offered to two young painters, but at the end of the war, the announcement was made that Léger was the choice. This opportunity fit into his desire to do a large mural mosaic. Léger was an avowed Communist, but he accepted the Virgin and her litanies as the selected subject matter.

The mosaic is done in primary colors (fig. 5). The focal point is above the entrance with a medallion head of the Virgin encircled by rays. Léger used overlapping irregular planes, each containing a symbol and text from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. The first face one sees is the face of the Mother of God to whom the church is dedicated. The Virgin's face is surrounded by ornamental motifs belonging to the litanies: Mystical Rose, Morning Star, Throne of Wisdom, Closed Garden, Tower of David, and the Ark of the Covenant. Léger eliminated the traditional veil and incorporated a strong inner stare like Greek statues. Nothing animates the Virgin's set facial features, a face of solemn gravity. Léger shows a simplicity and sharpness of line. In scale and monumentality, the strictly two-dimensional design follows the great examples of Byzantine and Romanesque church art. In spite of these large representational elements, the primary impression of the façade is nonfigurative.⁴¹ Léger insisted that the objects would have to be "integrated in the abstract nonfigurative spirit ... for they are a secondary consideration, and it is the abstract conception that remains dominant."⁴² Unfortunately, the pillars of the building interrupt the viewing of the totality of the mosaic.

The remaining artworks to be discussed are located inside the church. The interior retains the simplicity of the exterior, therefore allowing the appointments to dominate. The coffered ceiling displays massive carpentry and eight oak beams with naïve, folk-like

woodcarvings by Demaison (fig. 6). These support the church in fact and in metaphor. Eight figures, drawn from Scripture and tradition, depict the four evangelists, two prophets, and two saints. The prophets are Moses, representing the law, and Isaiah, representing the prophecy of the coming of Christ. Saint Irenaeus and Bernard of Citeaux represent the beginning and the end of the great era of doctors of the Church. A loft along the sides and the rear has v-shaped beams carved in the form of monks that help support the wooden ceiling. Demaison's art is representative more of the area than the standard art of the Catholic Church. It provides a traditional background for the modern art.

Below in the church proper, the curved sanctuary has side aisles flanked by low stone arches supported by smooth, squat columns without capitals, and the view of the main altar is unobstructed from any seating position in the church. The main altar consists of a stone tablet or mensa upon a block of polished but unadorned stone of the same material. The altar is raised only one step above the level of the sanctuary, which is two steps above the nave floor. There is no altar rail. Behind the curving columns of the sanctuary is a wooden grillwork that provides warmth and texture and admits light. Above this is an immense tapestry by Jean Lurçat (fig. 7).

Jean Lurçat was a tapestry designer and painter who studied at *École des Beaux-arts*. In 1912, he founded an art review, *Les Feuilles de mai*. Lurçat volunteered for the war in 1914, was wounded, and later served in the Resistance in World War II. He had his first exhibition in Zurich in 1917 of paintings inspired by Cubism, especially Braque, and by Matisse's drawings, which he produced as tapestries at a later date. Until 1931, he tried to produce murals. Lurçat was a friend of both Max Jacob and Amédée

Ozenfant. During the late 1920s he produced a series of large paintings influenced by Surrealism. The landscapes were muted, nightmarish, and desolate with the sea and rafts as themes.

From 1933, he began to focus on tapestries, and he received his first tapestry commission from the Gobelins in 1936. In 1937, he went to Anger to study the great series of *Apocalypse* tapestries (1373-82) to learn from the medieval weaving. He worked in conjunction with Marcel Gromaire, Dufy, and Derain. He concentrated almost solely on tapestries after World War II. In his later years, he attempted to answer the *Apocalypse* series with his *Song of the World*, which was a portrayal of the dangers and joys of the modern world. His tapestries celebrate life and the world through his favorite themes: the sun, animals, stars, and especially man, whom he saw as the center of the universe. Lurçat shows a rhythmic quality of natural forms placed against flat, often black backgrounds. His main contribution was to revive the tapestry in France. Much of Lurçat's original apprehension about the Assy commission stemmed from the fact that he was a Marxist and therefore would not do a Virgin in majesty as originally requested.⁴³ At their second meeting, Couturier suggested that he depict the cosmic struggle from the twelfth 12th chapter of the Apocalypse instead, to which he agreed.

The tapestry measures twelve by thirty eight-feet and is above and behind the sanctuary. It is a monumental visionary work, with whirling and blazing movements of colors. There are "splendid and hideous monsters, darting nippers, claws, vibratil cilia and pseudopods in sparks, cinders and fringes of clustered peaks."⁴⁴ Two panels flank the center panel. On the left with a red background is the Tree of Life and Death in the earthly paradise and the four kingdoms of the creation with their respective emblems.

Opposite to this, with a green background, is Tree of Salvation depicting the genealogy of Christ. Foliage decoration, following the Book of Isaiah, is in the form of the Jesse Tree. The center panel, in night-dark background and in flaming splendor, is the Woman Clothed in the Sun,⁴⁵ triumphant over the Great Beast with his seven heads and ten horns. This is the Woman and the Dragon facing each other in duel described in Revelation. "...and there appeared a great wonder in the heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of 12 stars ... and there appeared another wonder in heaven, a great red dragon, having 7 heads and ten horns, 7 crowns. There was war in heaven."⁴⁶ The woman is the Church exposed to the destructive power of Evil. But it is also the Virgin Mary whose triumph is illustrated in the lower part of the tapestry by the crushing of the dragon.

What is significant about this work is that it does not detract from, but accentuates the divine sacrifice that takes place on the altar. The church's primary purpose is to provide a place for offering the mass, and the altar and the sanctuary must command the first attention. Lurçat avoided putting a motif in the middle of the tapestry to save an empty space on which the Cross of the altar could stand out. This tapestry, designed for the semi-circular apse, combines an almost medieval wealth of anecdotal forms with a modern sense of large decorative mural effects. The limitation of the palette reinforces the simple language and gives the tapestry a flat boldness that defeats an impression of fragmentation and triviality. This approach "prevents the artist from falling back unconsciously on his training as an painter, chancing chiaroscuro, glazed effect, and plastic processes unrealizable in tapestry."⁴⁷ Like Léger, Lurçat shows an affinity for mural decoration.

What could be interpreted as modern in this tapestry is Lurçat's freedom to depart from traditional representations of Biblical characters, his willingness to value aesthetic judgment over iconographic accuracy. First of all, the choice of the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse for the apse decoration was an untraditional choice, and there is no climatic figure of faith, as is traditional in the apse. Instead there are two large opposing stylized figures representing good and evil, and the tension between the two unifies and holds the entire drama together. There is some question whether the intentional void is due to Lurçat's Marxist tendency against hierarchy or the aesthetic decision to isolate the crucifix.⁴⁸ The Virgin off to the right side of the composition is unconventionally drawn "with an oversimplified schematism of features, that renders her face a caricature."⁴⁹ In addition, Lurçat's depiction of the monster or dragon is based on the Beaulieu composition, a medieval Spanish tapestry.⁵⁰ The fact that Lurçat used mediaeval bestiaries would be interpreted by Couturier as a reference to primitive forms.

The tile artwork at the end of the left side aisle was created by Matisse. Matisse was not necessarily anti-Catholic but anti-clerical. Couturier points out in his diaries that Matisse, whether out of tradition or personal choice, still acknowledged the role the Church continued to play in France. Although Matisse did not attend church regularly, Couturier describes Matisse as one who "cannot put the 'sacred' into words, but he feels it strongly."⁵¹ In a conversation with Couturier, Matisse, in reference to a communication with Picasso, exclaimed: "I told Picasso, I told him, yes, I pray and so do you, and you know it!"⁵²

Above the left side aisle altar (fig. 8), Matisse situates his painting of Saint Dominic (1170-1221.)⁵³ Originally, Devémy had chosen Andre Derain for this site

because of his post-Fauve religious paintings.⁵⁴ Derain first agreed, but then withdrew. Devémy then went to Picasso's studio in Paris, but was shocked by the expressiveness of his style at this time. Thus Saint Dominic was left uncommissioned until 1948 when Couturier arranged to have Matisse make a variant of the large ceramic mural he was preparing for the Dominican chapel at Vence. This work is a line drawing in black on bright yellow ceramic tiles of a figure devoid of features, framed in a decorative pattern of grapes and leaves. There is a simplicity and boldness of expression that suggests Saint Dominic without appropriating any of the attention due to the main altar. It is a pure line drawing that most suitably translates Saint Dominic's simplicity, purity, and asceticism. Couturier admired Matisse's freedom to paint honestly, unrestrained by tradition. Matisse says of himself, "All my life I have been in a funk, afraid I wasn't doing my duty [as a painter]. When you have no laws to go by..." Couturier explains in the same diary entry that "by laws he [Matisse] means the traditions of the masters."⁵⁵ In December 1948, Couturier writes that Matisse is "so penetrated with the greatness of what he is going to represent, he no longer needs to hold himself in check. Matisse says, 'It comes out of me all by itself, and so the sign itself is noble.' That is, the quality of the forms as such."⁵⁶ And for Couturier, the quality in forms characteristic of Matisse's work is what carries the spiritual element in art. This quality of forms in Matisse's work echoed the quality of forms in Léger's work that he first recognized in America. "He [Matisse] always insists strongly ...on the living, vital, organic unity of the work of art."⁵⁷ Again, art had to be alive in order to be meaningful. The traditional religious work for the last fifty years was without relevancy. "Matisse's drawing tends quickly toward the sign pure and simple. Here a similarity with the sacraments. The intensity of the drawing, of the

line, becomes the sign of the intensity of the interior feeling and produces the intensity of the same feeling in the spectator. But not necessarily by 'resemblance' with an exterior reality. Art generates its effectiveness by its own means."⁵⁸

At the base of and beneath Matisse's tile work of Saint Dominique is a work by Georges Braque. Braque was approached in 1948 for his commission, and he created a tabernacle with a door in bronze on the altar of Saint Dominic (fig. 9). It has the eucharistic symbol of the fish topped with the letters IXTUS. The letters correspond to the initials of Jesus, Christ, Son, God, and Savior. These letters are the same as the symbol of the fish in ancient Greece that was used in early Christian catacombs.⁵⁹ At the bottom of the door is what appears to be a bunch of grapes that balances the composition. In spite of the harmony of shapes, the style is harsh. The scaled body of the fish alludes to the multiplied bread, the miraculous basket of the Gospel. The fact that Braque made something new from a symbol is a tribute to his artistic inventiveness, but it challenges liturgical requirements because it is nothing more than a niche in the wall and does not allow for the placing of the most necessary object, the crucifix. Braque states, "it is not the object that matters, but only what surrounds it."⁶⁰

Braque's independent spirit was greatly admired by Couturier. When Couturier asked Braque what ambitions he had as a modern artist, Braque answered that he did not know things ahead of time and he was like other modern painters who just wanted to "be true to ourselves."⁶¹ "The work that wants to get done despite the man and even against him is the only truly genuine one."⁶²

Above the right side aisle altar is the painting of Saint Frances of Sales. In Couturier's absence, Raoul Dufy, a practicing Catholic and friend of Devémy, was

originally chosen for this commission to depict the patron saint of the region, Saint Francis of Sales. It was impossible to make contact with Dufy,⁶³ so Bonnard was asked instead. Bonnard was greatly influenced by Gauguin's use of pure color in flat areas with strong outlines. In 1891 Bonnard joined the Nabis movement with their new gospel of painting. Like the other members of this group, he was attracted to Japanese art and was influenced by Fauvism (1905) and Cubism (1907-08). Above all, he wanted an expressive use of color and tight composition.

In the niche created by the right side aisle (fig. 10) hangs Bonnard's canvas in oils, "Saint Francis de Sales" (1567-1622). What we see on the canvas is a half-body frontal portrait of the saint against a background of children to either side of him and the town and mountains behind them. The stacked background perspective is reminiscent of Asian painting as the eye is led upward in a somewhat shallow space. His palette of soft purples, blues, and oranges creates a harmony of shades typical of Bonnard's use of color. Prominent brushstrokes and sketchy edges add a rhythm and liveliness to the nuanced canvas. Bonnard's painting is poorly lighted in this church, and the subtle forms are difficult to appreciate. Yet Couturier liked the setting for the work. "Bonnard's 'Saint Francis de Sales' has been shown several times in Paris in the past two years: it is now going to be tucked into that green granite arcade for which it was created and where it can finally receive its true value."⁶⁴ By using small indistinct shapes of color, the forms in the canvas become less structured, less traditional, and more abstract. By the use of an uncharacteristic hierarchic structuring of the sizes of the figures, Bonnard incorporates Byzantine techniques to show the prominence of Saint Francis.

Altogether there are eighteen stained glass windows – five at the front of the church, eight equally divided on both sides of the church, two in the baptistery, and three in the organ-loft. The eight windows of the nave depict the Archangel Raphael, also known as the healing angel, Saint Vincent of Paul who spent his life caring for the sick and wounded, Saint Francis of Assisi who showed kindness to the lepers, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux who, like the patients in the Assy sanatoria, had tuberculosis, Saint Peter who cured the sick, Saint Louis who built hospitals and later died of the plague, Saint Joan of Arc, known for her tenderness toward the wounded French and English, and Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows. They are linked together by their involvement with sickness or medical cures, which is meaningful in this area of sanatoriums. All of the artists of the stained glass cycle were practicing Catholics, and most of them were active in the modernist circles of Church decoration before the war.

Rouault contributed five windows to the stained glass cycle of the church. All of his works are located at the front of the church and from the exterior, they can be seen in between Léger's mural façade. These stained glass contributions were the first works of Rouault ever to be allowed in a church, and he was 70 years old at the time. Rouault worked in a revivalist spirit, echoing in color and form the Romanesque and Gothic traditions. Two of the stained glass windows represent scenes from the Passion: the insulted Christ and the chastised Christ. (figs. 11 & 12). Two other stained glass works offer a floral motif (fig. 13). Iconographically, the floral still-lives are linked to Christ through the symbolism of Isaiah, who refers to the Messiah in metaphors of flowers, grapes, and plants (fig. 14). The last stained glass work by Rouault is on the window of the mortuary chapel. It is the image of Saint Veronica and is said to have the features of

the artist's daughter, a blend of purity and mystic grace (fig. 15). Veronica is the legendary saint associated with Calvary, supposedly having received the impress of the features of Christ on her handkerchief when she offered it to Christ as he was carrying the cross.

These modern stained glass windows by Rouault were executed by Paul Bony, and they show an intensity and strength in rich colors. They are a combination of painted and stained glass, but despite Bony's great efforts, the Rouault windows cannot capture Rouault's painterly genius.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this commission pleased Rouault because it provided what Rouault considered the only proper locale for stained glass.⁶⁶ Rouault's *Seated Christ* (fig. 11) is one of the most successful windows, and it shows a mocked Christ crowned with thorns, showing the love and humility of a suffering Christ. The threefold message of passion, suffering, and illness was suitable for Assy, where many people were longing for health. The parishioners identified with the suffering in the features of the Christ of Passion and the hope in the floral forms. The strong graphic accentuation of the lead outlines is enhanced by the intense luminescence of the colors.

The story is that Canon Devémy was taken to an exhibition of religious art, "Vitrux et Tapisseries Modernes," at Petit Palais organized by Couturier and Jean Hebert-Stevens (This glazier, Herbert-Stevens, was later commissioned for a stained glass window at Assy), and he saw works by Rouault executed in the *atelier* of Jean Herbert-Stevens.⁶⁷ The Canon chose *Christ aux outrages*, the size of which fits exactly in one of the openings reserved for the west facade. On March 22, 1948,⁶⁸ Couturier relates a conversation with Rouault in which Rouault states: "They say I'm a colorist, but I'm very

concerned with form. I am awfully demanding about form,” recognizing that his art follows its own laws.

Couturier contributed two works to the stained glass cycle at Assy. Couturier did not begin his professional art career until the end of World War I, and when he joined the workshop of *Ateliers* in the early 20s, he knew he wanted to use his art to work for God, giving meaning to his actions. At that time he believed artists in general did not divorce their work from their spiritual values. Couturier entered the Dominican novitiate in 1925, and was ordained in 1930. His superiors recognized his artistic talent (he had been a priest for eight years at this time), and Couturier was sent to Rome for further study in art. Couturier visited places in Italy for inspiration. Even at this point, his self-imposed mission was to revitalize existing religious art and to substitute a suitable setting for the Divine truth. He was deeply critical of Church art produced during the last two centuries. Later he did, however, meet with the Pope who blessed his project of procuring the collaboration of contemporary masters for the decoration of the church at Assy.⁶⁹

As we have seen, Couturier held very conservative artistic views during the 1930's. He eschewed abstract art, characterizing it as 'inappropriate' for reaching out to the common person and for communicating the sacred mission of the church. He expressed these views in 1937 when he wrote "Picasso and the Current State of Christian Art," arguing that abstract art was not readable, that it failed to make the subject known, and that it mutilated nature.⁷⁰ But he dramatically changed his opinion after World War II, after having lived in New York. He realized two things: that abstract art was capable of being religious and that not being a practicing Catholic did not preclude a person from creating religious art. Some of his artist friends practiced varying degrees of

Catholicism,⁷¹ including Dali and Focillon, while others were not only non-Christians, but also Communists, such as Léger and Lurçat. Both Chagall and Lipchitz were Jews.⁷²

“Frontiers ought to be crossed...but first of all the frontiers of imagination and sensitivity, which cage us in when we think we are so free.”⁷³ In 1945, Couturier compared the visual art to music: “Music provides that an abstract art form, i.e., non-representational, can have religious value.” He came to believe that abstract art could be purer, and therefore more spiritual than representational art: “...it offers a detachment which predisposes a naturalistic transference of the carnal and the ties of sensuality which we normally apply to representational art and the expression of sacred realities.”⁷⁴ In 1947 he loosened his ties with the *Ateliers*, the place where he had received his early art training. At this point, he realized that the *Ateliers* group was “wrapped up in itself rather more than it should be” and that Denis’s teaching at the *Ateliers* was too systematic.⁷⁵

Couturier had also modified his views on how art was sacred. The personal freedom offered by his American exile and friendships with expatriate European artists helped to effect a gradual transformation in attitude as Couturier began to understand the use of ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual’ instead of ‘sacred’ when referring to art. Sacred art was a description limited to ecclesiastical connotations and prevailing forms of power while the use of the term ‘spiritual’ referred more to a state resulting from a critical reflection.⁷⁶ By spiritual is “meant an understanding or experience of the human self as related in a vital way to an other - be it a world, place, or person.... which may [or may not] be religious in the formal sense.”⁷⁷ As a priest, Couturier understood that we gain access to a spiritual state through tangible means. Thus experiencing the “material” art

had the potential to lead to a spiritual interpretation. Special consciousness or contemplation of the object sets it apart from the profane and it transcends the ordinary. His deepened friendship with Charlot made Couturier aware of the spiritual dimension in primitive forms; these primitive forms spoke to deep needs that were part of all societies and all people.

Through Léger, Couturier's aesthetic transformation went one step further. Léger showed that the value of the form did not lie with the subject but with the pure form itself. Forms have value in themselves. Importantly for Couturier, Léger sought to free form and color from their traditional understandings. In spite of Léger's modern forms, his art continued to speak to the public because Léger's underlying goal was to create an art that was accessible and relevant to all people. Léger simplified or abstracted to communicate. "It is a human necessity which demands in works...that touch people, crowds, the men who direct or command them must listen to hearts beating..."⁷⁸

Until his American exile, Couturier's search for art forms and universals was largely undirected. Now he knew he wanted an art that had the capacity and potential to transcend the ordinary and thus lead to the sacred. He reasoned that this was the true art, and it was true through its purity of form. By purity of forms, Couturier reiterated what he had learned from Léger. Couturier understood purity of forms as "the beauty of forms as forms – independently, ...of subjects or intentions."⁷⁹ "As soon as such concessions intervene we leave the realm of art for the realm of propaganda."⁸⁰

The pure forms are also the living forms. These were the dynamic forms. They are the *élan vital*, the spontaneous energy, the urge toward creative action that Henri Bergson talked about. "One of the essential conditions of life is to move and so to

change, ” and so it is with art.⁸¹ These forms are the “transmission of life.”⁸² These were the forms that would cause the continuous, even perpetual, renewal that is essential to life and to art.⁸³ These are the type of forms that could bring a continuous regeneration of life in the Church.

Although the realization of the spiritual capability of abstract forms was new with Couturier, it was not a new concept in art. Mondrian, who was also in America at the same time with Couturier, had eliminated all references to natural forms to produce a distinct transformation in the viewer’s response to art. There is no mention in Couturier’s diaries of direct conversations with Mondrian, but with the growing sense of an artists’ community and constant exchange of ideas in New York, Mondrian’s aesthetics, at once utopian and universal, would have appealed to Couturier. Mondrian believed that abstract art had the power to inspire more profound and transcendent aesthetic perceptions through the purification, revitalization and liberation of human consciousness.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the power of abstract art was not limited to the field of art; it had universal application. Art and life were inseparable. “The systematic search for the style which would epitomize the epoch (the ‘idea of the age’ in which the individual disappears) documents the overcoming of personality by the autonomy of the work itself, the dissolving of the individual in the collective.”⁸⁵ For Mondrian, these pure forms released the viewer from “regressive ways of perceiving and living.”⁸⁶

Mondrian and Couturier shared important ideas in common. The fact that both men had a strong religious background helps explain that both wanted the beautiful and the good to become one. Mondrian joined the Theosophists in 1909 and adopted their endorsement of universal brotherhood and art’s universal application. “Mondrian

maintain[ed] a world-view and employ[ed] a critical jargon patently derived from earlier texts fundamental to the international Theosophic movement..."⁸⁷ Both saw a link between the aesthetic and the spiritual dimension. As Mondrian professes: "What we want is a new aesthetic based on pure relationships of lines and pure colors, because only pure relationships between pure constructive elements can result in pure beauty. ... Pure beauty is necessary to us because it is the only means capable of a pure manifestation of the universal force which is found in all things. It is identical with what was revealed in the past under the name of Divinity..."⁸⁸ Both reached for abstract forms, for abstract forms removed the limitations of representational forms to unite with the universal. The abstract had the power to inspire more profound and transcendent aesthetic perceptions.⁸⁹ Why did they want this? Both felt that a unified universal art would ultimately result in a universal brotherhood, and that in the future art and society would be liberated and this new freedom would be mutually enlightening. "The Dutch group [De Stijl] ...considered that art and beauty should legislate a universal means of communication and education in the forthcoming Utopia."⁹⁰ Both believed that the importance of past art was not based on its external appearance but rather on that in it which reached out toward objectivity, spirituality or universality. Quoting Couturier, "This modern art, so often accused of materialism, will be recognized as one of the most spiritual...in its essence as art."⁹¹ "What gives art its dignity is that it raises the body and the senses to the spirit's mode of knowing ..." ⁹²

But Couturier and Mondrian differed on one main point. For Mondrian, removing all representational and natural characteristics was not only liberating form from its limitations, but he also saw this as removing all subjectivity from forms to reach

universality. Couturier agreed that the use of representational forms was confining and restrictive, but unlike Mondrian, he thought of the abstract form as highly subjective since the modern artist was not following prescribed traditional styles. The artist was exercising his individual subjective thought. The personal interaction between artist and creation meant it was non-academic but subjective and alive. The fact that it was a pure living art gave it universality.

Couturier's own artistic contributions include two stained glass windows. He had previously designed several windows for the crypt in the cathedral of Chartres. In some of his earlier murals and paintings designed for devotional cards, Couturier shows stylized figures, somewhat elongated and graceful reminiscent of Denis's work (fig. 16). His style is different at Assy. Although like Jean Bazaine's St. Gregory and Paul Bony's St. Peter, Couturier's work is simpler and more angular and puzzle-like. What is evident at Assy is the way the stained glass windows transfer the formal notions derived from cubism to a glass-staining technique.

Couturier created the Archangel Raphael (fig. 17) in a modulated scale of red and gold.⁹³ The Archangel Raphael is depicted as a young man who carries his sword across his body. Unlike Rouault's work, there are no harsh black lines or heavy contours and few dark patches. Couturier also created a window of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) a popular patron saint in France. Her autobiographical book is *The Story of the Soul*, and she was also known as the little flower (fig. 18). Like the Archangel, St Thérèse is done in clean crisp lines that flatten the figures in their frames. There is little modulation in color or heavy black outlining. There is, however, a face superimposed on a piece of cloth that adds mystery to the work.

Jean Rene Bazaine's windows are situated at the front of the church in the organ loft. From the exterior, the windows can be seen at the top of Léger's mural façade. Bazaine was a French painter and writer who studied at *École des Beaux-Arts* and the Sorbonne in Paris for a degree in literature. In 1924, he began to paint, and he showed at Galerie Jeanne Castel in Paris with Jean Fautrier and Marcel Gromaire. In 1926, he met Bonnard who advised and encouraged him. In 1932 he began the review *Esprit*. In 1934, Bazaine had his first watercolor exhibition, and in 1937, he met Jacques Villon and made his first stained glass window for a private chapel. After WWII, he began to move toward abstraction. In 1939-40, he helped organize, with German authorization, the first modern art exhibition in occupied Paris. The exhibition was entitled *Vingt jeunes peintres de tradition française*, a title designed to conceal its avant-garde nature. From 1942 to 1947, he adopted in his paintings a geometric armature derived from cubism. In 1948 Bazaine wrote *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui* in which he attempted to dissolve the traditionally rigid duality between figurative and abstract art - a problem in relation to his own art. Bazaine made the first mosaic on the facade of the church at Audincourt in 1951. Later works showed the loss of geometric appearance of earlier works but the addition of a diffuse coloring, much like Monet.

Since Bazaine's works are situated in the organ loft, their subject matter accordingly deals with music (fig. 19). He depicts King David, the Old Testament prototype musician, Saint Cecelia, the Patroness of music, and Gregory the Great, the codifier of the chant.⁹⁴ Bazaine's style differs from Couturier in that the pieces of stained glass are much smaller and more uniform in size. There is a definite verticality to the work as sharp pieces set up parallel lines. Bazaine worked in a semi-figurative cubist

style with a grid of spanning and crossing lines, and his work is illustrative of this grid. Bazaine says: "Painting has always depended for its validity on the degree of interior existence that the artist knew how to give to reality... the interior world of the artist... the essential sincerity quite beyond external appearances."⁹⁵ "Forms take shape in the imagination, then these forms develop, evolve, engender other forms...these transformations and transmutations are not wrought by chance...they are directed by the interior feeling (out of which the forms are born) that seeks to express itself through them with ever increasing purity, integrity and strength."⁹⁶

Opposite the sanctuary against the entry wall of the church is a sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz. Lipchitz was a French sculptor of Russian birth who had studied briefly at *École de Beaux-arts* before transferring to *Académie Julian*. He was fascinated with non-European cultures and was friends with Brancusi, Soutine, Modigliani, and Max Jacob. His changes in artistic style were influenced by the artists he met. In 1913, through Diego Rivera, he met Picasso, and at this time he adopted a more simplified geometric style. *Mother and Child* (1913-14) shows an assimilation of bold, simplified cubist forms. It also shows influences of Egyptian and African sculpture and hints of Brancusi and Modigliani. His style became more abstract in 1915 when he met Juan Gris. In the 1920s, he was concerned that his sculpture was too abstract, and that he had lost the sense of the subject and of its humanity. In 1917 he abandoned austerity and renewed his interest in frontality. In 1925, he focused on the three-dimensional form and began a series of transparencies in which he played with space with a kind of open, lyrical construction, with a juxtaposition of solids and voids and interlocking forms. Mythological, Biblical and sexual themes begin to dominate his work. *Prometheus*

Strangling (1936) was conceived as an attack on Nazism, with Prometheus symbolizing democracy. The work was destroyed in 1937 when the press attacked it. *Mother and Child* (1941) is expressed as the anguished despair of the horror of war. Its stump-like arms and truncated body created an image of mutilation. Lipchitz became acutely aware of the Jewish cause in the 40s.

Lipchitz was approached by Couturier in America in 1947 for a work for the baptistry. The commission was not finished until 1955. Originally it was a baptismal font with a figure of the Virgin, but because of the small size of the baptistry, it was decided to move the Lipchitz Virgin to the church proper. This work is an open, transparent structure with powerful baroque rhythms. Lipchitz stated in 1953: "...the interest of the church in modern art is not of recent times, many important works were created between the wars. It does not astonish me that the church wants to integrate modern art for the use of religion. With few exceptions, it has always been like this, since the church generally considered a work of art as a medium to join earth to heaven. The distinction between a religious and a secular work of art does not exist. The difference between religious and liturgical art is only a matter of degree."⁹⁷ And as a Jew, "his upbringing had imbued him with the significance of ritual and symbol sufficiently for him to understand what the Catholic service required."⁹⁸

This bronze work is described as "...the dove of the Holy Ghost flying earthward and catching in his beak the tripartite 'canopy' of the heavens, supported from below by the Archangels (fig. 20). The Virgin emerges from the center with outstretched hands in a gesture of reception."⁹⁹ The Virgin, protected and covered by the shadow of the spirit, as the mother of God, offers her sheltering tender mercies. As conceived by Lipchitz, the

dove is the only one who has actual sight. The Virgin is not looking at anything; the Cherubim, located below the Virgin, are blind, as is Christ who is portrayed as the Lamb of God.¹⁰⁰ Written on the sculpture are these words: "Jacob Lipchitz, Jew faithful to the religion of his ancestors, has made this Virgin to foster understanding between men on earth so that the life of the Spirit may prevail."¹⁰¹ Lipchitz had to make a second version of the Madonna because his first version, along with other major works and most of the contents of his studio, was destroyed by the fire that gutted his New York studio in 1952. Lipchitz believed that art is one of the strong elements that can help to create a religious feeling: "If you create something that helps to adore our Lord, it is legitimate."¹⁰²

Marc Chagall's art works decorated the baptistery. Chagall had found a receptive environment in New York, working with Pierre Matisse and showing annually throughout the war years.¹⁰³ Although he considered America a land of vitality and sensitivity, American subjects never played a prominent role in his work.

Chagall, who had already produced etchings for an illustration of the *Old Testament*, created five works for the baptistery. It was clear that Chagall was comfortable taking part in a set theme involving rituals and laws since the Jewish themes such as the wandering Jew, the crucified Christ, and the fleeing mother and child had always been important to him.¹⁰⁴ Chagall's works for Assy are described as a type of fantasy, charged with Jewish symbolism in bright colors and pulsating space. The main work is a mural-epic illustration on large ceramic tiles of a biblical theme: Moses, shining with light, opens the way across the Red Sea to lead a dense column of Hebrew people moving forward on an azure background (fig. 21). In the foreground is the Egyptian army among tumultuous waves, with chariots, horses and confused bodies. The Angel of God

precedes the camp of Israel, peacefully moving over the scene with white spread-out wings. Chagall had a keen sense of liturgy and did not fail to represent in the upper corner the Crucifixion, as the baptism of blood. His inclusion of the crucifixion is intended to reflect the suffering of all people in the human world. He states: "All the human distress flows towards the Cross, as a wave towards the shore, while the time of the world is flowing."¹⁰⁵

Chagall also did two marble low reliefs (fig. 22) and two stained glass windows in grisaille with the appropriate symbols of baptism and its rites (fig. 23). He dedicated his work "*au nom de la Paix et de la tolerance entre tous les homes*."¹⁰⁶

The focus of the rest of this chapter and the last work to be discussed is the crucifix by Germaine Richier. This is the artwork that generated the most controversy at Assy. Léger's work was dubbed a blasphemy; Richier's caused a riot.¹⁰⁷ Germaine Richier studied with a former pupil of Rodin and in 1925 with Émile-Antoine Bourdelle in Paris.¹⁰⁸ She participated in the exhibition "*La Passion du Christ dans l'art française*" at the Trocadero. Her style was classically figurative until World War II when she left Paris. Her first show after that was of large bronzes at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1948 in which she showed a world of disturbing, half-metamorphosed creatures like *Praying Mantis* (1946) and *The Storm* (1947-48). She stated they were related to the violence of the natural world that she had observed in Provence as a child¹⁰⁹ and to the existential doubts and anxieties of post-war Europe. The brutal treatment of her material allied her to Giacometti (fig. 24), while the use of wire structures such as *Diablo Player* (1950) could be metaphorically suggestive of a web of fate. The *Christ d'Assy* in 1950 represented the Redeemer as tortured and emaciated. The emphasis on death and decay

recalls the tomb sculptures of her medieval namesake Ligier Richier, whose works were reproduced in *Cahiers d'art*. In 1951 she collaborated with Vieira da Silva and Hans Hartung. Her small lead figures resembled the "plombs de Seine," small votive offerings cast into the Seine near Notre Dame in Paris in the Middle Ages. These small votives were often gilded with colored glass.

Richier stated in 1953: "In all ages art has had contact with 'the religious spirit'." For her, contemporary art follows this principle. She continued, "...contemporary art and the religious spirit have values in common. Human feeling is not the privilege of any one being, whether artist or churchman. The artist manifests himself in this work, and the work declares its faith in the spiritual direction to which it pledges itself. Expression in sculpture, in the arts, has the power to signify beyond ordinary language. Hence the interest of our endeavors."¹¹⁰

The Richier Crucifix is at the center of the sanctuary, before the main altar in the traditional location (fig. 25). It is abstract resembling a "found object" and has been described as bronze drippings on a stick.¹¹¹ The long, narrow arms of cross and body are on a diagonal slant that is in direct conflict with the horizontals of the altar and tapestry above it. The severity of the smooth stone altar is contradicted by the crude agitation of the bronze rendering. The tortured, slashed, gnarled-like petrified bark body is Isaiah's vision translated into a bronze casting: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots;" or "for he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form, no comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."¹¹² Richier looked at the

crucified with the eyes of a prophet; she gave Christ unspeakable grief. But the curve of the arms that bend down to the earth as a gesture of tenderness opens the door to meditation. This work was so shocking for the church that it became the focal point of an international controversy.

The Controversy at Assy

Couturier commissioned traditional church-related arts such as stained glass windows, painted panels, a cross, an exterior facade mosaic, sculpture and a tapestry. While these were traditional in function, the forms the artists chose deviated from the accepted or recognized canonical visual church material. These works were modern art forms created in varying degrees of abstraction. Of all the works, the Richier Crucifix most pitted the Church's interpretation of appropriate religious images against Couturier's new and deeper understanding of art and religion.

The crucifix is the expression of the Word, the sign of the sacrifice perpetuated at each mass on the altar. Without the Cross, no Gospel is proclaimed, no sacrifice reproduced, and there is no gathering place where common faith is shared. The cross is anchored at the heart of the Church. The crucifix is the focus that confers meaning to the liturgy, the religious symbolism, and the artistic inspiration.¹¹³ Because the Richier Crucifix was more strange than beautiful, it became a questionable work to carry that focus.

There are complex oppositions and ambiguities created by the image. Richier's Crucifix is a large art object situated above the beholder and in the center of the sanctuary before the main altar in the church. The long and narrow arms that parallel the arms of

the cross are on a diagonal slant that contrasts from the horizontals of the altar and the tapestry above it. The form is slightly curved outward toward the beholder through the bowed legs and upper torso which separates it from the upright cross itself. This creates an impression of uneasy balance as the dying form infringes upon the beholder's space. The head, chest cavity and slight drapery around the hips are subtly indicated to maintain a strong vertical thrust to the work. Slight allusions to the muscles of the shoulders, elbows, and wrists are seen, the eyes are barely visible, and a slight horizontal line is made to represent the mouth.

But what is perhaps more striking is the handling of the surface treatment. Richier captured a petrified bark-like look by working the bronze cast with abrasives, creating rich contrasts between the ridges and the valleys on the surfaces, exposing her childhood interest in trees. The malleable impasto textures contribute to the impression of age and organic growth and decay as if the body spoke of the mystical Tree of Life and continuing cycle of decay and regeneration. The severity of the smooth altar stone and sanctuary is contrasted by the agitation of the bronze rendering. Although sometimes described as a "desiccated corpse,"¹¹⁴ Richier describes her work not as dying, but changing and transforming, as a metamorphosis, and as a becoming.¹¹⁵ And because of its non-realistic form, its ideological nature seemed to take on a greater importance. It was hoped by Couturier that within its visible structure, there would be greater access to transcendental truth. To the Catholic Church, the sacred or transcendent can be authenticated in vision by art. For the Catholic vision, the Crucifixion is visualized directly, for vision has direct access to things of the spirit.¹¹⁶

This crucifix was rejected by the Bishop of Annecy, and was not replaced in the church until 1953 with the intervention of the Papal document: "... that the function of art is to break the narrow and agonizing circle of the finite in which man is enclosed in this life and to open a window to his mind yearning for the infinite."¹¹⁷ Interestingly, throughout the long and heated debates over this crucifix, the parishioners and local citizens, who had a tradition of welcoming a changing population of patients, sympathized with Couturier's endorsement of modern artistic trends.¹¹⁸

The controversy surrounding the Richier Crucifix focused attention on three issues: 1) the appropriateness of modern art forms for sacred art. 2) the relationship between Church and state, and 3) the Catholic counter against Protestantism. Each is discussed below.

The appropriateness of modern art forms for sacred art was the ostensible question. At Assy, Church hierarchy protested the use of modern art for religious purposes as inappropriate, singling out the crucifix as particularly offensive. This was based on the Church's decision that: 1) the form was distorted and 2) the work was abstract. But in fact, these two objections were weak because a precedent for both distorted and abstract forms in religious art had already been established. This particular ruling reflected the Church's lack of understanding of abstract art.

We can look at the Church's reasoning by re-visiting its rules and canons on sacred art. The few Vatican rulings concerning art stressed exclusion and tradition. Innovation and creativity were discouraged. The Council of Trent, 1545-1563, whose overall goal was to counter the Reformation, attempted to purify the Catholic Church by regulating every aspect of religious discipline. It reaffirmed medieval theological ideas.

As discussed in Chapter I, this council censured distortion and innovation in art, and in 1942, Pope Urban VIII extended this ruling by requiring all images of holy figures inconsistent with their orders and traditions be destroyed.

Canon Law 1279, dating from the 2nd Nicene Council, and addressing the problems of Iconoclastic controversy, warned that “the composition of religious images is not left to the invention of artist, but is dependent upon the laws and traditions of the Catholic Church.”¹¹⁹ As previously discussed in Chapter I of this dissertation, the influence of photography in the nineteenth century and the idea of finish became a standard for judging religious art. The idea of finish became synonymous with completeness, a necessary condition in religious art required by the Church. Hence an abyss was created between creative artists of the last 100 years and church art. This law stated that every sacred image must reflect due decency and respectability and completeness.

Canon Law 1164 required prescribed that sacred art observe “forms received from Christian tradition,” but it is open to a myriad of interpretations.¹²⁰ Did this mean re-workings of older forms? If so, that would mean that Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance art would have been rejected.

Pius XII’s encyclical *Mediator Dei, Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Liturgy* (November 20, 1947) had a cautionary air: “...we observe with considerable anxiety and some misgivings that elsewhere certain enthusiasts, over eager in their search for novelty, are straying beyond the path of sound doctrine and prudence. Not seldom, in fact, they interlard their plans and hopes for a revival of the sacred liturgy with principles which

compromise the holiest of causes in theory or practice, and sometimes even taint it with errors touching Catholic faith and ascetical doctrine.”¹²¹

Amid all these Vatican rulings, Couturier in a 1949 answer to Letters to the Editor of *Liturgical Arts*,¹²² defended the modern forms of the church of Assy by stating: 1) That the Pope would have no real competence in questions relating to modern art because the answer would require a specialist, and the Pope is not a specialist. That is not his role. He can only proclaim rules on the moral or liturgical level concerning the arts, and the same can be said about mathematics or medicine. 2) That the Pope had sent his benediction and a sum of money for the Church at Assy and blessed the modern artists who worked there. 3) That Assy maintained very strict rules concerning the quality of the works that were in full accord with the Authority, and 4) That Assy and Vence could serve as examples for interpretation of the last encyclical.

In 1950, the Church showed signs of change. In 1950 Pius XII opined that “the purpose of all art is to break the narrow boundaries of the finite, and open windows onto the infinite for the benefit of the human spirit, yearning in that direction.”¹²³ In 1952 the Vatican and the “Instruction” emphasized the link between sacred art and liturgy, deploring mediocre, mass-produced images and praising artists who were outstanding for their technique. However, they also discouraged “unusual images...not in conformity with the approved usage of the church...representing false dogma...the occasion of dangerous error to the unlearned.”¹²⁴

But in 1955, Rome obliquely targeted the Church at Assy by specifically condemning the participation of non-Catholic artists in church decoration. This is contained in the Encyclical *Musicae sacrae disciplina* by Pius XII.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the

encyclical goes on to state that such expressions as “art for art’s sake” constitute a grave offense against God himself.¹²⁶

The Church did issue additional changes on its art policies, but these changes did not take place until Vatican II (1962), after the Assy Controversy. Even then, the proposed changes were not unanimously accepted. As previously discussed, the Church handed down Canon Law 1390 due to the spread of kitsch, a cheap and gaudy religious ornamentation known as “Saint-Sulpice art” that was produced commercially in series. The Vatican took a stand on this art and objected to it not primarily in terms of its style, but because it was manufactured. Canon Law 1390 forbids the decoration of churches with images reproduced in a series, arguing implicitly that the spark of genius can be present only in unique artistic creations. Nevertheless, “Saint Sulpice” art had support among high ecclesiastical and lay authorities, and it was retained and supported because it could never arouse sentiments that the Church might find questionable. In fact, many saw this manufactured art as part of the new industrial age that overcame the provincialism of true folk imagery and rural craftsmanship. In a nostalgic respect for folk craftsmanship, the local autodidact, Constant Demaison, made the roof beams for Assy, and the result is an archaism that contrasts with the other decorations of the church.

The Catholic Church never had a comprehensive art program. Rulings on art were general and often ambiguous, and how art was used was generally left to the decision of the local priests, whose seminary teaching did not include the fine arts: “...its object [seminary teaching] was not to make scholars but pious, dedicated priests...”¹²⁷ The predominant art in the Catholic Church for the last 100 years was the art of Saint Sulpice.

However, Richier's *Crucifixion* is not that unusual when seen in a greater context. More importantly, we see that a precedent had been set for the use of abstract and/or distorted forms in religious art. Religious art from the Middle Ages with its flat simplified forms in shallow space and S-slant poses of the crucified Christ can be described as abstract. The exuberance and expressionism of *Saint Theresa of Avila* by Bernini in the seventeenth century can be interpreted as highly subjective and original, and the attenuated forms and figures by El Greco are a distortion of reality. Even Maurice Denis' delicate figures are not true to nature.

The *Gero Crucifix* (c. 970) from the Cologne Cathedral was modeled after the Byzantine depiction of the suffering Jesus. This was the tortured martyr, not the triumphant hero. The broken body, near death, sags, and the head falls forward with the closed eyes. The Marcovaldo painting of the crucified Christ with the bleeding, slumped body (c. 1250) again shows the *Christus patiens*, the suffering Christ, not the *Christus triumphans*. The Roettgen *Pietà* (c. fourteenth century) mirrors the ecstatic joys and extreme suffering of the Middle Ages. Blood gushes out of Christ's body, a distorted abstract display of grief and horror.

The great crucifixion painted for the high altar of the church in Isenheim by Matthias Grünewald is dated 1515 (fig. 26). The tremendous agony of the figure of Christ is prominently displayed in the sagging body across a roughhewn cross. The crucifix's asymmetrical placement in the composition adds to the dynamic tension. Grünewald's Christ is a powerful depiction of intense physical suffering. There is no doubt that Grünewald distorted his forms in this depiction of the crucifix that is a

precursor to the subjectivism and intense emotionalism of German Expressionism which began in 1905.

In 1882, at New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, Thomas Eakins exhibited his *Crucifixion* (fig. 27). Although it was condemned by the critics as being too realistic to be appropriate to the sacred subject, Eakins had achieved an heightened expressiveness through an abstract exaggeration of his forms. The critic Lloyd Goodrich stated “that Eakins was motivated to the *Crucifixion* primarily for pedagogical reasons... an objective study of a human being in his last moments; of religious feeling there is hardly a trace.”¹²⁸ Like Grünewald, Eakins boldly confronts the viewer with his Christ suspended on a cross also set asymmetrically in the composition. The critics described it as “one of the most powerful, horrible and yet fascinating pictures that has been painted anywhere in this century.”¹²⁹ In his work, Eakins also took liberty with his forms and distorted the body of Christ.

Thus there were examples of earlier religious art that were, in some sense, abstract or distorted in concept, style, and/or visual creation. Furthermore, the idea of an abstract art had been strongly associated with the Western tradition of painting as early as 1907 with the accepted influence of Cubism and the spiritualism of Kandinsky and Mondrian. Distortion was typical of Richier’s post-war work as was seen at a 1948 show at the Maeght Gallery in Paris. At this exhibition Richier’s sculptures had pitted bronze surfaces that had what looked like decaying debris from nature integrated into the forms.¹³⁰ Both Richier and Giacometti had demonstrated how formal disintegration, a paring down of form and its metamorphosis could heighten the expressive presence of the human figure.

Other objections to the Richier *Crucifixion* described it as too graphic, violent, and a sacrilege. The crucifixions by Grünewald and Thomas Eakins were considered equally startling for their day. Yet studying the Richier Crucifix and these aforementioned crucifixion scenes in their proper context, we find they were true to their times. The artworks at Assy were created during a postwar period of ambiguity with a “simultaneous desire for both caesura, continuity and catharsis”¹³¹ It was a time of blurring political, religious, and cultural notions as France attempted to deal with its humiliation and loss of confidence caused by the war.¹³² The anonymous tortured victim replaced the crucified One, the painted Christ.¹³³ For both the Church and the art world, the concept of man as witness as discussed by Sarah Wilson took on political implications. Like others in her generation, Richier was seeking inspiration in a more authentic type of experience and her iconography and her approach to materials were deeply rooted in their time: “The emergence of new styles reflect human anxieties in the modern era, and Richier’s work reflect post-war concerns.”¹³⁴ And it is to Richier that post-war sculpture owes its characteristically ‘brutalized’ surfaces.¹³⁵

At the Assy Church in the foothills of Mount Blanc, Richier was creating a crucifix for a church attended primarily by convalescing patients from the surrounding sanatoria. The patients could relate to the desiccated form on the cross. This Richier depiction, with the emphasis on suffering and the distortion of forms, could also be descriptive of the Eakins and Grünewald crucifixions. Richier distorts her form from a “normal body,” just as the others distorted their bodies through the use of violent forms and colors. The forties and the fifties were troubled times. The crucifixion, and not the

resurrection, was the appropriate dominant motif, for destructiveness rather than harmony characterized contemporary existence.¹³⁶

The church's program of institutional revitalization had included art because art had always played an important role in the Catholic Church; hence, a sacred art movement. But instead of praising and building on the innovative art program at Assy, it condemned modern art as totally inappropriate for religious purposes. The modern art forms that Couturier commissioned for Assy precipitated an adverse reaction by the Church. The church claimed that these forms were abstract, unnatural, and thus perplexing. But it is precisely because of abstraction's unnatural forms that it can free itself from the bonds of sensuality that attach us to natural realities to gain the spiritual freedom of religion.

The argument that the use of modern art or abstract forms would not be appropriate for religious purposes could not be proven by Church hierarchy since Richier's use of unnatural or distorted forms had an historical precedent in religious art. Discussion of the other two problematic issues for the church will show that the church's objection to distorted or abstract forms for religious purposes was not based solely on the art's visual appearance as the Church publicly professed.

The second difficult area brought to light by the modern art forms at Assy was not exclusively a sacred art issue. Rather it was a political issue concerning the relationship between church and state. What was more disturbing to the Church was not the visual form itself, but the content of the art. In this case, the modern art form had become a symbol for the content. It was the content that triggered the uneasiness and fear that made the church hierarchy react negatively to the art. Quoting Rosalind Krauss: "The point of

all sculpture is not its capacity to imitate the look of living flesh, but its power to embody ideas and attitudes; sculpture, all art, is fundamentally ideological.”¹³⁷ Even if the forms were not intrinsically anti-religious, their formal presence evoked hostile associations and ambiguities. The church hierarchy found modern forms inextricably linked to revolution, anti-authority, and divisiveness. Modern art forms, especially abstract forms, became a symbol of the ideology of modernism. The Church could not reconcile faith, art and modernity. Modernity as an ideology, as the thought forms of a culture, is centered in human subjectivity and freedom. Modernity was a powerful influence whose ideology had an undeniable impact on all artistic, political and religious development. And at Assy, the Church had attributed other meanings or content to the subject of the crucifixion in the Richier work and the other modern art forms commissioned by Couturier.

The relationship between church and state in France had historically been a struggle of power. Since the 1516 Concordat of Bologna when the King was given the right to appoint the bishops in France, it was perceived that the king, as the state, also shared in the ecclesiastical power of the church. This political entanglement was reinforced in the seventeenth century by Louis XIV who used religion to justify his actions, and it survived the beginnings of modern political ideas like rights of man and representative government in the late eighteenth century. In 1905, however, a separation of church and state in France formally occurred. The state officially stopped paying the priests' salaries and took control of all church buildings, but religion continued to be associated with Catholicism. Assy was being built during times of conflict, chaos, war and the German occupation in France. The official separation of church and state had not

severed their historical entanglement in the public's mind. The conservative Church had not taken an active stance against the Vichy government, a tacit endorsement of their policies. Thus it can be suggested that the artistic rebellion at Assy called attention to the lack of rebellion by the Church and the Vichy government against Nazism.

When Assy was first commissioned in 1938, WWII had not yet started, but by 1940 the Germans had invaded and were occupying France. This was a difficult time politically. France was divided into 4 sections under the Vichy state, resulting in a confusing political and administrative situation. Vichy's pluralistic dictatorships needed a close relationship with Germany to provide an operational basis for their policies, and France entered into a close economic collaboration with Germany.

Although not in power in France, communism became a second threat to the people of France. With his prominent allegiance to the occupying government, Philippe Henriot, a French broadcaster, instilled a daily fear of communism by reinterpreting contemporary political events as part of a Bolshevik conspiracy. Through the power of his broadcasts, Henriot convinced thousands of listeners that this "obsessive fear of communism was their own rational good sense."¹³⁸ He was calculating in his propaganda and was careful never to refer to German tactics of terror or brutality. His goal was to foster the people's allegiance to Germany whose defense was credited with "protecting French civilization from the Bolshevik danger."¹³⁹ This propaganda was not so difficult to accept since the *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1878 was directed against "...that sect of men who....are called socialists, communists, or nihilists...the deadly plague that is creeping into the very fibers of human society and leading it on to the verge of destruction."¹⁴⁰ Communism was the enemy of the Church

and the French people. Philippe Henriot recognized the Church's potential power, and he used his Catholicism by appropriating a photograph of the Cardinal for use on his pamphlets.¹⁴¹

What was the Church's political stand? The Catholic Church, even with its diminished authority, was still viewed as the spiritual leader of the majority of the people of France. In France in 1940, there were at least ten million active Catholics,¹⁴² and the state and church intertwining was continually being reinforced. L. de Bonald, a Vichy ideologist, called for stability in the family and adherence of society to the moral and social principles of Catholicism.¹⁴³

The Catholic Church authorities, reinforcing a long history of alliance with government, advocated and/or practiced collaboration or at least passivity regarding the German occupation, although some clergy did support the resistance.¹⁴⁴ Pius XI in 1936 had spoken out against the persecution of German Catholics, and he later condemned Nazism in a separate encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge*. This was the "first great official public document to dare to confront and criticize Nazism"¹⁴⁵ However, he also condemned communism in 1937, describing it as "... bolshevistic and atheistic Communism which aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization."¹⁴⁶ In general, it seemed that the Church's fear of communism moderated its criticism of Nazism.

The persecution of the Jews was one confrontation that the Catholic Church could not satisfactorily resolve, and that problem continues even today. In a 1994 *New York Times* newspaper article, Pope John Paul II urged the Roman Catholic Church to atone for its transgressions, "including acquiescence in human rights abuses under totalitarian

governments of the 20th C... when the Church did nothing to speak out against the mass killing of millions of Jews.”¹⁴⁷ In a 1998 encyclical, Pope John Paul II called for the Catholic Church to apologize for its inaction against the Nazis during WWII. The document is described as an act of repentance for the failure of the Roman Catholics to deter the mass killing of Europe’s Jews during WWII. At a 1998 symposium it was interpreted as rendering no judgment on those Catholics who collaborated with the Nazis or those who kept silent, but it does acknowledge the Church’s responsibility for the moral climate that allowed the Nazis to dominate much of Catholic Europe.¹⁴⁸ Given the diminished power of the Church, it is not surprising that the Occupation was successful in stifling religious opposition.

Within this tension-filled atmosphere, the Church at Assy was created, and it is within this charged atmosphere that the controversy at Assy can be best understood. The Church, in between two warring ideologies, was trying to regain the eminence it had lost in the past. Its stance in the Richier Controversy aligned it with the Vichy government, and thus a tacit endorsement of the Germans. It was no secret that the Nazis considered modernism as degenerate art.¹⁴⁹ Modern art was considered “revolutionary, foreign, and dangerous.”¹⁵⁰ The Nazis viewed abstraction as unnatural. The German-controlled government in France had imposed their official position against what they defined as decadent, a thinly veiled alibi to allow government officials to empower certain groups while punishing others. A program to purify art had been instated, and the Jews, as the non-French in France, were labeled foreigners and therefore impure and decadent. The Jews became the artistic scapegoats in France and Jewish exhibitors were forbidden and Jewish gallery owners were forced to sell or close their galleries.¹⁵¹

Both the Nazis and the Communists argued for social realism, even though any realism connected with socialism was seen as a lack of freedom. "...as the spineless reproduction of a given reality or ...spineless conformity to the artistic dictatorship of the Stalinist attempt to gloss over reality."¹⁵² This would be anathema to Couturier's way of thinking.

The Catholic Church is an institution of steadfast tradition and unity. The Church was not only trying to maintain a delicate relationship with the government, but it was also trying to survive as an authoritative institution. The general public was sympathetic with Hans Sedlmayr's argument against abstraction as expressed in his book, *Loss of the Center*. Sedlmayr argued that increasing abstraction and actual lack of representation was a fall from God, and a concomitant turn toward nihilism. "The lost center of man ... is simply the loss of his relationship with Him."¹⁵³ Thus use of modern forms would have required both political and religious ideological re-evaluations.

Modern art stood for change, movement, and individualism. Modernity concentrated on everyday life, whereas the Church wanted its adherents to think of a transcendent life. Modernism concerned itself with changes caused by industrialism, while the Church concerned itself with spirituality. Modernism advocated personal commitments; the Church saw individualism as divisive and urged community effort. Furthermore, by accepting modernism, the Church would be endorsing art that the Nazis found unacceptable and reaffirming those values that Nazi ideology was against. Modern forms stood for individualism, de-centralization, and a type of subjective expressionism that chose to reveal, not conceal, human existence. Nazi ideology wanted conformity, not diversity.

A third complicating issue brought out by the Richier Controversy was the Catholic Church's continuing ideological struggle with Protestantism. The Church's acceptance of modern forms could also be construed as an endorsement of the Protestant Reformation.

As discussed in Chapter I, much of the sacred art development covered in this dissertation can be interpreted as a reaction by the Catholic Church to the Reformation that began around 1517.¹⁵⁴ For instance, the Catholic Church countered the Reformation in the late 16th century by purposely adopting as its artistic expression the Baroque style. It wanted to convey an ecclesiastical self-assurance and authority, a power and exuberance embodied in its physical structures. The exterior facade of churches acquired a new propaganda, and the interior was equally designed to impress. An oval interior scheme was incorporated, uniting the space for the congregation and the altar. This single large area of worship suppressed the size of the side aisles so that all present could see and hear what was taking place. This progressive trend towards a square rather than rectangular plan for the interior contrasted with earlier churches from the Middle Ages when the clear distinction between the clergy and the laity was reinforced with screens, chancels, etc. Even the celebrant stood with his back to the people, and in some cases, the sanctuary would be a separate room from the nave. The new building design made the service more accessible for the congregation as word and sacrament were integrated.

On the main altar was now placed a tabernacle or receptacle for the reserved sacrament, the localized presence of the divine. In the Baroque characteristic, the church borrowed from both the court and the theatre.¹⁵⁵ This was the period of nation-states, each with its own monarch enjoying riches and ceremony. Conspicuous wealth and

displayed splendor were prominent, fusing all visual arts together. Liturgy assumed greater importance. Mass became the opera, and the main devotional act was the exposition of the sacrament, with the end of this scene showing the priest holding up the consecrated Host to the assembled. This was fitting because the Mass is the central Christian act of devotion.

The continued emphasis on spirituality and sacraments resulted in the emphasis on ritual over preaching, and the visual and decorative over words. The Church had always understood that we were both flesh and spirit, and the Church had employed the arts to lead the spirit through the flesh to a deeper comprehension of the mysteries of the Faith.

Productive relationships between the clergy and great artists had existed in all great eras of Christian art, but in the period from the French Revolution to the time of the church of Assy, few significant liaisons between artist and cleric had developed. The long tradition of interplay between the sacred and the arts, capable of sustaining the revolutions of the medieval, renaissance and the baroque, had collapsed. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, the church turned to mediocre talents, merchants and carpenters of an art and architecture that was religious simply because it presented a Christian figure. Lourdes, Fourviere, and Lisieux have art that is imitative, mediocre, and lacking depth. In the environs of Paris alone, 120 churches had been built, but without the advice of a single significant architect.

There was perhaps only one important sacred art commission during the entire nineteenth century in France. The commissioned artist was Delacroix, said to be an atheist, and his commission was for the Chapel of Holy Angels in Church of Saint-

Sulpice. This was the last project by Delacroix before his death in 1861. He began the sketches in 1850 for the chapel in Saint Sulpice in Paris. The subject matter included Heliiodorus being driven from the temple. Jacob wrestling with the Angel, and on the ceiling, Saint Michael defeating the Devil. The Heliiodorus work refers back to the inspiration of Raphael, and the Jacob shows the influence of Old Masters. Other traditionally acceptable and desirable artistic styles by the Catholic Church at this time included those of Hippolyte Flandrin, who was characterized by the Vatican as an artist with "outstanding artistic manifestations of divine grace" and followers of the artist Ingres.¹⁵⁶

Protestant churches were generally more accepting of modernism. One of the driving forces of the Reformation was to adopt different forms of worship from the Catholic Church. Diversity in belief and practice is an important part of the Protestant heritage.¹⁵⁷ Expressions of subjectivism and departures from standardized models through the use of a more visually creative form were Protestant goals. Protestants emphasized individualism; the Catholic Church emphasized church, saints and doctrine. The Catholic hierarchy reasoned that personal expressions challenged basic beliefs and practices and church authority. The result would be a de-centralization of both church organization and service. "The Reformation ... shattered the spiritual unity of Europe. ... and the artist, ... becomes the self-centered, introspective, egocentric individual, driven insistently to express not that which was beyond and above himself, but - simply and frankly - himself."¹⁵⁸ It was precisely this type of attitude that the traditional Catholic Church authorities saw in the adoption of modern forms. Hence the traditional church's theological conformism had led to an artistic conformism and stasis.

Richier's Crucifix exemplified what Paul Tillich interprets as the Protestant principle of "emphasizing...man's subjection to death. ...his estrangement from his true being and his bondage to demonic forces-forces of self-destruction; ...that it is man in ...despair."¹⁵⁹ This spoke visually to man's despair, and not to the Catholic Church's grandeur, glory, and transcendence. The subject of the Richier Crucifix was rightfully the dominant motif for the destructiveness, not the harmony, that characterized contemporary existence. Richier's work is powerful not only because of the subject matter but also because of her modern style.

It was Richier's bold handling of the crucifix that revealed man's cultural plight that made it an example of Protestant understanding and challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. Richier subordinated anatomical allusions to the "essential stiff, dry form which leans toward us but is so isolated from us."¹⁶⁰ Art was programmatic for the Catholic Church, and the Church used art specifically for the reinforcement and encouragement of church doctrine and spiritual matters. Using modern forms did not elicit the desired contemplation. Visual images, for the church, should be presentational rather than discursive. The Richier Crucifix was discursive. For the Church, the image should awaken and focus the beholder's desire to imitate the spiritual characteristics presented by the image. Contemplation in which one is lifted out of the familiar world and into the spiritual begins with the physical vision. But Richier's image of Christ was one of eternal suffering, with no reference to Christ's transcendence, glory, or miracles. The dry stiff form of Christ did not engender feelings of devout compassion but could be read, instead, as a body victimized by the war.

The values of the Richier Crucifix were antithetical to the Church's priorities. Church and the government treated beliefs as essentially fixed, eternal and immutable. The Church had aligned itself with the existing government, hoping to recapture the privileged position of its past. The artists, regarding their government as ambivalent and ambiguous, sublimated these feelings of political betrayal in their artwork.

Conclusion

Couturier's goal to commission artists that would revitalize the sacred art program and thus the life of the Catholic Church revealed institutional and political problems that is best understood by studying the history of the Assy Church. The issue of modern art and faith is concerned with the relationship between image and experience, and more specifically, between image, programmed content, and devotional experience. The Catholic Church is a single body, the spiritual legal institution founded by what it sees as divine law. Its concerns are the divine/human relationship with the mind playing a subordinate role in experiencing the church-imposed truth. The rituals and liturgy are a reaffirmation of the eternal internal unity. The church has one voice.

The suppressed institutional and political problems of the Catholic Church came to a head with the Richier Crucifix. The image is the crucial instrument for galvanizing the Church's force and communicating its liturgical programs and teachings, and transcendence is not an intellectual, but primarily a sensory experience. The image objectifies that which is non-rational. Image and liturgy fuse together in the presence of imagination. Understanding is based on visuality and the image, not on discourse. In the Catholic Church the visual image has a fixed meaning and must be seen within a given

text; otherwise it is semantically null. The inclusion of lavish and exuberant details on the object speaks of a triumphant Christianity as it associates the church with imperial power, and the standardized forms create continuity with a more authoritarian past. But the Richier Crucifix was problematic because its iconic form, the crucifix, that traditionally inspired the expected contemplation of spiritual matters, now elicited strong feelings of ambiguity, diversity and doubt.

Richier's agitated rendering of Christ elicits and illustrates such strong human compassion that it seems to call into question the very mystery of the incarnation. Sarah Wilson reads Richier's manipulation of the material not only as an enhancement of its expressive powers, but more as a reflection of post-war concerns, blurring the lines between political and religious martyrdom.¹⁶¹ The critic and art historian David Sylvester wrote that Richier's assault on matter was "a metaphor for the survival of the human body."¹⁶² For Sarah Wilson, it was Richier's fusion of *matière* as *memoire*, "the metamorphosis of event to symbol" that caused fear of her crucifix.¹⁶³ The handling of the body of Christ was so overwhelming that the beholder collapsed the visual image with the experience. This experience was no longer that of a restricted church doctrine, but of a different reality created by the artwork itself. In both cases, the collapse of the 'message' and the 'constitution of the message itself' meant that the crucifix did not function as the Church desired.

Barthes provides greater insight into the question of image/meaning in the Richier Crucifix. Although language is the key for Barthes, the Saussurean insight that the sign is always a matter of historical and cultural convention is applicable to visual forms. The Catholic Church understood the insistence on a given context. But Barthes also demands

that the sign declare itself as being arbitrary/relative/artificial precisely because it is a historical and cultural convention - it is 'empty' until we give it a cultural meaning. It should not declare itself as ideological and authoritarian and seek to "naturalize" social reality because then it becomes a myth as an unchangeable sign representing the world as God himself might know it. It becomes a representation, a vehicle of meaning conceived independently of itself. For Barthes, the world we live in is an alterable structure of signification. Barthes speaks of a 'metalanguage,' a discourse that is above the situation and analyzes it. The text should, if modernist, have no determinate settled meanings: it should be diffuse and plural with no beginnings, endings, or sequences denoting hierarchies.

Barthes' studies point out two ways in which we can understand why the church was against the Richier Crucifix. First, the Church stood for unchanging truths. There was no room for relativity in its dogma or doctrine. Barthes was against authoritarian and absolute readings of signs because it argued against its relative status. What Barthes proposes was antithetical to the Church's unity whose very existence is based on an unquestionable authority. Second, the proposal for ambiguity created a questioning of not only the doctrine but of the authority behind the sign itself. The very authority of the Church was being attacked. By the very nature of its rendering, the relationship of artwork to beholder in the Catholic Church was challenged in the Richier Crucifix.

Michael Fried speaks of the relationship between the beholder and the work of art. For Fried, it is a matter of maintaining the distance between the beholder and the artwork in order to perpetuate the purity of the arts. A problem arises when the distance between the art and the beholder collapses and the beholder becomes more interested and

concerned with her presence and/or reaction to the artwork than to the artwork itself. This condition happened at Assy with the Richier *Crucifixion*. Because of its form and its surface treatment, its opacity prevented the communication of any programmed message. The distance between the beholder and the artwork collapsed, successfully preventing any logical narration or spiritual experience of transcendence.

Krauss interprets this opacity as an obstacle for programmed information: Fried would regard this opacity as an obstacle to the artwork's inability to maintain the proper role relationship between art and beholder. The *Crucifixion* cannot succeed because the beholder, and not the crucifix, becomes the subject of the situation. "The object, not the beholder, must remain the center or focus of the situation"¹⁶⁴ for art to succeed, but the situation belongs to the beholder, not the object. The visual forms of the *Crucifixion* become so compelling in themselves that the beholder becomes conscious of the form as a work of art, and not as a vehicle to communicate doctrine. The image is so powerful that there is a collapse of the beholder/artwork relationship. The beholder becomes a vital physical part of the relationship and the awareness of one's awareness usurps the crucifix as the subject as the beholder becomes the subject of the experience. This, too, was antithetical to the Catholic Church since one is supposed to lose oneself to a higher reality, not assert oneself.

Thus the external appearance and the forms become important. For the Church, the sign becomes ideological. The form, the crucifix in this case, and the sign should point to a pre-determined meaning without a trace of arbitrariness. The secular world, not the Church, is the proper arena for struggles with issues of appearance and reality, the objective and the subjective, and nature versus art. But in the case of the Richier Crucifix

and its external forms, the ideology of the sign of the crucifix as representational of church doctrine is called into question, and thus we are forced into a type of interpretive violation. We are treading into a no-trespassing zone, a beginning of confusion into fixed roles and relationships, a going beyond a beholder's designated boundaries. What is especially disturbing is the fact that meaning, the signified, now appears unstable and shifting, with no determinate truth. The framework of collective belief is threatened. The Church had only one possible response and that was to remove the crucifix. The crucifix was no longer about or for something; it had become an object for itself. The crucifix was constructing a reality, and not reflecting a truth. The referent and history thus became suspended, encouraging a pluralism not permitted before. Not only was the dogma being questioned, but the authority by which this dogma was being transmitted was also under attack.

Endnotes

1. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Century," *The New York Times Magazine* Dec. 1999: 15.
2. Frances Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55* (London: Tate Gallery, 1998) 23.
3. Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia* 157.
4. Mona Hadler and Joan Marter, "WW II: Reverberations," *Art Journal* 53 (Winter 1994): 6-14.
5. Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia* 123.
6. Morris 23.
7. Romy Golan, lecture, "Art and Politics in France, Italy, and Germany from 1945 – 1985," The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York, Fall 1988.
8. Denis, "Definition du neo-traditionnisme" 10.
9. Couturier, "Note by Father Couturier," *Liturgical Arts* 19.2 (Feb. 1951): 31.
10. The works of Albert Gleizes and Gino Severini are considered too much of a compromise with their softened formulas derived from images and art of 1905-30, but they were favored by some diocesan commissions. Their style is a derivative type of modernism: their style operates under the premise that truth is necessarily found somewhere between two extremes – but artistic truth for Couturier is absolute.
11. For a history and in-depth discussion of the art works at Assy, see Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 28-30.
12. Alfred Barr, *Matisse – His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951) 280.
13. Couturier, "Assy," *Harper's Bazaar* Dec. 1947: 121-122.
14. Johanna Weber, Dedication Ceremony for Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and Arts, Yale University, 9 Feb. 1992.
15. Reverend Richard James Douaire, "Pilgrimage to Assy – an Appraisal," *Liturgical Arts* 19.2 (Feb. 1951): 28.
16. Canon Devémy, *Le chanoine Devémy et ses amis parlent de l'Église d'Assy* (Lyon: Imprimerie Lescuyer, 1985) 6.
17. For further discussion on the history of the commissioned artists and their subject matter, Couturier, "Historique de l'église," *L'Art Sacré* No. 1-2 (Sep. – Oct. 1950): 3-6 and "La leçon d'Assy," *L'Art Sacré* No. 1-2 (Sep. – Oct. 1950): 16-20.
18. Couturier, "Art for God's Sake," *Time* June 20, 1949, 27.
19. Marie-Alain Couturier, "Assy," *Art Sacré* 1-2 Sep. – Oct. 1950: 16-17.
20. Rubin 151.
21. Rubin 85.

22. Devémy says after seeing Picasso's work in his studio in Paris: "Il lisait sur mon visage mon embarras et mon regret." A. Ceppi O.P. *Le Chanoine Devémy et ses amis parlent de l'Église d'Assy*, 10. This work is a small booklet obtained from the French Tourist Board. There is no indication of publisher or date. It is apparently distributed to tourists who visit the church at Assy.
23. Couturier in Ceppi, 12
24. Rubin 160.
25. Richier in Ceppi, 12.
26. Rubin 103.
27. Ceppi 16.
28. Letter to Father Couturier, Ceppi, 21
29. Rubin 116.
30. Rubin 116.
31. Rubin 126-127.
32. Rubin 134-135.
33. Couturier, "La Forme humaine dans l'espace" *Fernand Léger: A propos du corps humain considéré comme un objet*, M-A Couturier, Maurice Gagnon, S. Giedon, et. al. eds. (Montreal: Les Éditions de l'Arbre, 1945) 14-23.
34. Léger, *L'art Sacré* 7-8 (March-Avril, 1954): 6.
35. Werner Schmalenbach, *Léger*, trans. Robert Allen and James Emmons (New York: Abrams, 1976) 120.
36. Tim Benton, *Europe under the Dictators 1939 – 45*, ed. Dawn Ades (London: Heyward Gallery, 1996) 56.
37. Golan, lecture, fall 1998.
38. Matthew Affron, candidate lecture, The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York, 19 Mar. 1998.
39. Mark Antiff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001) 129.
40. Antiff and Leighton 40.
41. Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 122.
42. Léger, "Sens de l'art moderne" *Zodiaque*, 2.18-19 (Jan. 1954.): 36-40
43. Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 102.
44. *Nôtre-Dame De Toute Grâce: Plateau d'Assy*, trans. F. Combes and B. Legrand (Lyon: Lescuyer, no date) 4.
45. A large sun symbol encases the Virgin, suggesting a Zoroastrian token of sun-worship.

46. The Book of Revelations. Saint James Version of the New Testament, Chapter 12.
47. Lurçat in Claude Roy, *Jean Lurçat* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1956) 60.
48. Rubin 109-110.
49. Rubin 107
50. Rubin 9. fn.
51. Couturier, *Reflections*, 7 Oct. c. 1948, 152. Couturier had been posing for the figure of Saint Dominic to be used in Assy and in Vence.
52. Couturier, *Reflections*, 29 Mar. c. 1948, 180.
53. Saint Dominic was the founder of the Order of Preachers. He was friends with Saint Francis of Assisi, helped nuns, stressed the importance of Bible study, taught and is considered the first minister of public instruction. He advocated true love of neighbor, the idea of poverty, and helped organize the Order of the Nuns of Prouille.
54. Rubin 150.
55. Couturier and Matisse, *Reflections*, 22 June c. 1948, 51.
56. Couturier, *Reflections* 161.
57. Couturier, *Reflections*, 15 Feb. c. 1949, 171.
58. Couturier, *Reflections*, 9 Apr. c. 1948, 183-184.
59. Abbé Devémy in Ceppi, 12.
60. Braque in an undated and unpublished correspondence to Couturier, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University.
61. Braque in Couturier, *Reflections*, 25 Feb. 1950, 202.
62. Braque to Couturier, dated 1947, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University.
63. Rubin 151.
64. Couturier, "L'église d'Assy et la chapelle de Vence," *L'art Sacré* (Mai-Juin, 1948): 109.
65. Rubin 93.
66. Rubin.
67. Ceppi 7-8.
68. Couturier, *Reflections* 178. Day is correct, but the year is not indicated in this diary entry.
69. The Pope did donate a purse to be used for the building of the Assy church, but Couturier notes that it was fairly standard practice to do so. In reference to the Pope, Couturier states that "he would have done the same for others." Couturier, "Assy," *Liturgical Arts* 19.2 (Feb. 1951): 30-31.

70. Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle* 43.
71. Couturier, "Religious Art and the Modern Artist," *Magazine of Art* Nov. 1951: 270.
72. Introduction to Marie-Alain Couturier, "To Remain Free," translated from *Le Figaro Littéraire*, Paris 20 Jan. 1962 in *Atlas*, Apr. 1962: 320.
73. Couturier, "Frontiers," *Art and the Sacred*, 98. This is another undated and unpublished collections of Couturier's writings translated by William Granger Ryan, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University.
74. Couturier, *Art et Liberté Spirituelle* 65-66.
75. Couturier, *Reflections* 60.
76. David Morgan, "Secret Wisdom and Self-Effacement: The Spiritual in art in the Modern Age," *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ed. Richard Francis (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996) 35.
77. Morgan 34.
78. Léger, *Functions of Painting* (New York: Viking, 1973) 121.
79. Couturier, "Art is for the Eye," *Art and the Sacred* 2.
80. Couturier 3.
81. Couturier, "Modern Painting," unpublished article, Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts, Yale University, 6.
82. Couturier.
83. Couturier.
84. Barron and Eckmann 191.
85. Italo Tomassoni, *Mondrian* (London: Hamlyn, 1970) 7.
86. Barron and Eckmann 191.
87. R.P. Welsh in "Mondrian," *Piet Mondrian: Centennial Exhibition* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971) 37.
88. Mondrian in Frank Elgar, *Mondrian*, trans. Thomas Walton (New York: Prager, 1968) 93-94.
89. Barron and Eckmann 191.
90. Thomas B. Hess, "The Dutch: This Century," *Art News* LI (Jan. 1953): 24. See also Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, c. 1983) 154.
91. Couturier, "Austerity in Modern Art" in *Art and the Sacred* 21.
92. Couturier, *Reflections* 23.

93. Raphael was one of the seven archangels and one of the three angels who are named. Michael and Gabriel were the other two archangels given names. Raphael was sent by God to minister to Tobias and Sara. He was the angel who healed the earth when it was defeated by the sins of the fallen angel.
94. Gregory the Great was also a Pope, coming from a long line of popes. He wrote *Dialogues*, a popular book of the Middle Ages. He was a popular and just teacher and was influential in the conversion of England. He strengthened the position of the Roman See.
95. Bazaine in Couturier, *Reflections*, 23 May (no year indicated) 308.
96. Bazaine, 9 Aug. 1950 entry in Couturier, *Truth Wounded* 124.
97. Lipchitz, "Symposium on Art and Religion," *Art Digest* (15 Dec. 1953): 8.
98. Abraham Marie Hammacher, *Jacques Lipchitz*, trans. James Brockway (New York: Abrams, 1975) 83.
99. Combes and Legrand 29.
100. Hammacher 84.
101. Combes and Legrand 29.
102. Jacques Lipchitz in Emery Grossman, *Art and Tradition: The Jewish Artist in America* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1967) 87.
103. Matthew Affron, "Constructing a New Jewish Identity," in Barron and Eckmann, 116.
104. Affron 114.
105. Combes and Legrand 29.
106. Chagall in Ceppi, 21.
107. Sarah Wilson, "Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute," in Morris, 42.
108. Morris 161.
109. Quoted in Françoise Guiter, *Germaine Richier*, tran. Barbara Shuey, 1988, n.p., 28.
110. Germaine Richier, "Symposium on Art and Religion," *Art Digest* (15 Dec. 1953): 8.
111. Douaire 30.
112. Combes and Legrand 6.
113. Christine McFadden, "Religious Art," Lenten series, St. Bartholomew's Church (New York: Spring 1997).
114. H. H. Arnason, *Germaine Richier Exhibit*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1958) Introduction.
115. Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959) 131.
116. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990) 150.
117. Papal document quoted in "Symposium on Art and Religion," *Art Digest* (15 Dec. 1953): 33.

118. Rubin 52.
119. For a discussion of this Canon Law, see Rubin 15.
120. Father Régamey, *Art sacré au XX siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952) 171.
121. Pius XIII, *Mediator Dei*, Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Liturgy, 20 Nov. 1947, rev. ed. (New York: American Press, 1954) 16.
122. Couturier, *Liturgical Arts*, 19.2 (Feb. 1951): 31.
123. Pius XII, "The Function of Holy Art" (Papal Address) *Catholic Mind* 50th Year, No. 1079 Nov. 1952: 697-99.
124. Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "On Sacred Art" (Instruction to Bishops), 30 June 1952. English translation in *Catholic Mind*, 50th Year, No. 1079, Nov. 1952: 699-702
125. Pius XII, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, Encyclical letter, 25 Dec. 1955, French text, *La Documentation catholique*, No. 1217, 22 Jan. 1956: 74-75.
126. Pius XII 74.
127. Ryan, Unpublished notes, 1-2.
128. Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Works* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933) 105.
129. Clarence Cook "The American Artists, Vanishing Day at the Second Exhibition," *The New York Daily Tribune* 8 Mar. 1879, n. pag.
130. Michele C. Cone, "Mature Richier, the Young Cesar: Expressionist Confluences in French Postwar Sculpture," *Art Journal* (Winter 1994): 75
131. Wilson, "Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute" 25.
132. Wilson 29.
133. Wilson 27.
134. Selz 131.
135. Wilson, "Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute" 42.
136. Morris 15.
137. Krauss 9.
138. Gerhard Hirshfeld and Patrick Marsh, eds., *Collaboration in France: Politics and Culture During the Nazi Occupation, 1940-1944* (Oxford: St. Martin's, 1989) 38.
139. Hirshfeld and Marsh 44.
140. Pope Leo XIII, *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, Encyclical on Socialism, (Rome: St. Peter's Cathedral, 28 Dec. 1878), online, Fordham University 3 Feb. 2001 <<http://www.fordham.edu>>.
141. Hirshfeld and Marsh 73.

142. Hirshfeld and Marsh.
143. Hirshfeld and Marsh 48.
144. Hirshfeld and Marsh 27.
145. Carlo Falconi, *The Popes of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967) 230.
146. Pope Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, Encyclical on Atheistic Communism (Rome: St. Peter's Cathedral, 19 Mar. 1937), online, Fordham University 3 Feb. 2001 <<http://www.fordham.edu>>.
147. *New York Times* 15 Nov. 1994, 22.
148. John E. Morley, moderator, "We Remember" Symposium, The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York 4 Nov. 1998.
149. Peter Chametsky, *Autonomy and Authority in German 20th Century Art: The Art and Career of Willi Baumeister (1889-1955)* diss. City University of New York, 1991, 482.
150. Fritz Kaiser, "Guide to the Degenerate Art Exhibition, 1937," *German Expressionism*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), 309.
151. Michele Cone, *Artists Under Vichy: A Case of Prejudice and Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) 12-13.
152. Kaiser 28
153. Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* trans. Brian Battershaw, 1948 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958) 173-183.
154. Julius Held and Donald Posner, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Art: Baroque* (New York: Abrams, 1979) 21-23.
155. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* vol. II (New York: Random, 1951) 185-186.
156. Ingres studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, won the Grand Prix de Rome, and began to paint religious subjects in 1833. He had works at Nantes, Lisieux, Chapelle Saint Jean of Saint Severin in Paris, had many state commissions for murals, and did Biblical scenes for *Saint Germaine-des-Pres* in Paris (1842-46). He took advantage of the mid-nineteenth century revival of large scale church decorations in Paris. He also accepted sentimental works like *Saint Thérèse de l'Enfant Jesus* at the Basilica at Lisieux.
157. John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through Its Development* (New York: Random, 1951) 185-186.
158. Ralph Cram, *The Catholic Church and Art* (New York: MacMillan, 1930) 25.
159. Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 119.
160. Jane Dillenger, *Style and Content in Christian Art* (New York: Abingdon, 1965) 214.
161. Wilson, "Germaine Richier" in Morris 162.
162. David Sylvester, "On Germaine Richier" in Pieyre de Mandiargues, *Catalogue for Richier Exhibition* (London: Hanover Gallery, 1955) u.p.

163. Wilson, "Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute," in Morris, 42.
164. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 828.

CONCLUSION

Father Couturier and his project at Assy had the potential to revolutionize the Catholic Church's relationship to modern art. Couturier's commission of artists who used modern art forms was an iconoclastic revolution. He did this in hopes of invigorating a Church that he thought had lost touch with the modern world. At a time when the Church was being attacked for its conservative stance during World War II, acceptance of Couturier's project could have signaled reform within the Church, but the Church hierarchy saw this as a threat to their power structure. They rejected Assy and even went so far as to have the Richier Crucifix removed from the church.

As a young priest and artist, Couturier believed that the Church needed to revitalize its art. He believed there was too much kitsch posing as art in churches, and that the vitality of the Church could be regained if better art were used. However, he did not believe that abstract forms were appropriate for sacred art. Then he went America where he stayed as a result of the German invasion of France.

It was during his stay in America that Couturier revised his views about what sort of art can properly function as sacred art. That revision was a result of his experiences in America. There were two movements in America that affected Couturier during his exile.

The first movement, the American Liturgical Movement, was begun by American Catholics who, in the European tradition, were looking to the Church for intellectual stimulation. Like the French Sacred Art Movement, the American Liturgical Movement hoped to revitalize the Roman Catholic Church, and both chose art as the medium

through which this could be accomplished. Both religious movements published a journal, *Liturgical Arts* and *L'art Sacré* respectively, and neither enjoyed the unqualified support of the hierarchy. The American movement differed from the French in that it was lay-oriented. The American movement reasoned that if the goal of liturgical change was to increase audience participation, then corresponding art and architectural changes must accompany the changes in liturgy. In France, the movement was clergy-originated, and the emphasis was on the art form, not the liturgy.

Couturier's views on sacred art were influenced by Jacques Maritain, with whom he maintained his friendship while the two were in New York. Maritain believed in the separation of the artist and his work, arguing that the artist must be faithful to his own truths. However, Maritain also argued that the Church could not accept inappropriate art because it can admit to no primacy outside itself. Although Couturier eventually disagreed with Maritain on this issue, he did agree with Maritain that the quality of religious art cannot be improved, the sacred art movement cannot proceed, without opening up to the modern art movement.

Couturier's struggle to revise his thinking on sacred art took place in the midst of the New York art scene of the late 1930s and early 1940s, the second movement in America that contributed to Couturier's evolution. The New York art world was alive with radical ideas during Couturier's exile. The preoccupation with concept of myth as interpreted by Jung gave universal form to basic human truths. Regardless of time or place, all civilizations understood these basic needs. Primitive art with its archetypal symbols and dramatic simplicity had captured the imagination of American artists and intellectuals. There was a fascination with Native American art in particular. It was seen

as untainted by the contemporary world and its problems, as expressing an enduring truth. Its symbols were seen as authentic and the eternal. It was Jean Charlot, also exiled in America, who helped Couturier see the value of primitive art. Couturier saw something of the popular concept of the universal unconscious in primitive, and this helped him to see that perhaps the formal religious faith of the artists was not necessarily a factor in the ability of the art to engender religious feelings in the viewer.

While in America, Couturier's thinking shifted from the sacred/profane dichotomy to questions of spirituality. 'Sacred' is a term limited to ecclesiastic connotations, while 'spiritual' is descriptive of an experience of the self. From Charlot, Couturier understood that the way we relate to primitive art set it apart from the profane to transcend the ordinary. Thus, the material form had the potential to lead to a spiritual interpretation. Primitive art may not be 'sacred,' but it can be spiritual. Of course 'spiritual' is more individualistic whereas 'sacred' is more organizational. This turn towards spirituality was in keeping with the individualism that Couturier experienced in American society and politics. Unfortunately, the Church was not looking for art that would encourage individuality, and this was one of the factors that lead the Church hierarchy to reject what Couturier did at Assy.

But the final push toward pure abstraction for Couturier came from Léger, who saw the liberating potential of non-objective and geometric art. Léger's concern with the formal order of painting shifted attention from graphic symbolism to capacities of color, form and space to acquire absolute intensity and independence. Couturier remarks that viewing Léger's work in New York in 1942 helped him to finally understand that the value of the form did not lie with the subject but with the pure form itself. Léger saw a

social function in his separation of color from the form: he was loosening the habits of thought chaining the ordinary man. For Léger, purity of form is an escape route from imitation and hierarchy.

Couturier was now convinced that abstraction - pure form with no decoration or adornment to diffuse the essence of truth - had the capacity for being the most spiritual of all art. He also saw that the use of modern abstract forms in art represented an exercise in personal freedom that was vital for the continuity of life – not only artistically, but also socially, politically, and ecclesiastically.

Couturier believed that truth and meaning were relayed visually - that it is through our visual perceptions that we gain the meaning of the art. Great artists and masters are able to capture the truths within their chosen forms through the formal elements of their paintings. This aesthetic theory allowed Couturier to commission artists without regard to their religious or political beliefs.

Couturier chose modern art forms because they were relevant. They were the living forms that embodied a common spirituality that had been present even in primitive times - not a common religion, or a common form, but a common spirituality. These forms evoked a sense of creativity and originality through a passionate engagement with the world. Couturier reasoned that only when artists were creative were they being individuals, but to be an individual required a certain degree of freedom that had been denied to artists commissioned for religious works in the immediate past. The continuous act of creation restored the hope that the world will continue despite all adversity. As long as people used their creativity, human life with all its variations will continue.

Couturier saw the abstract form as being the best style in which to express the timeless and universal truths of the Catholic Church. The abstract form has no reference to anything in the physical world (profane), thus purifying vision in order for vision to recognize the truth in the pure form (spiritual). Abstract art was important for the idea of mystery that was present in the church liturgy. Representational art leaves no room for mystery. Representational art is directive; there are no such markers in abstract art.

The Church had lost most of its creative impetus in the preceding centuries, and it was left in a defensive and retrospective position. Against traditional Church policy, Couturier turned to the best of modern French artists, some of whom were either indifferent or in opposition to the Catholic faith, because he valued artistic genius over individual religious beliefs. Couturier was convinced that modern forms and the perfection of these forms as created by these artists had the potential to evoke a spirituality that had waned in the Church for the last century.

But the Church took another view. The hierarchy criticized several of the art works at Assy, but their disapproval was aimed primarily at the Crucifix by Germaine Richier. The local priests and diocese normally determine the art program at any given church. The hierarchy in Rome generally deals only with major cathedrals. Assy is a pilgrimage church, a regional church using the local stone, the standard architectural style with the sloping roof for the abundance of snow, and the characteristic wood sculptures in the beams. This regional style used by the architect, Novarina, would have been decided by the local clergy, not the Pope. The intervention of the hierarchy was obviously politically motivated.

The Church hierarchy wanted to remove the Richier Crucifix. The problem with the crucifix was that it defied traditional religious art meaning. As an artwork, it suggested themes that the Cross is supposed to evoke – suffering, death, humanity, even redemption. But as a religious icon, it was all wrong. It did not portray Jesus representationally. Indeed, the figure on Richier's cross is hardly human. Yet its form leads the viewer to an intense and subjective feeling of spirituality. Richier's work did what sacred art should do; it did not do what the Church wanted. It did not stick safely with the past; it did not keep the worshipper on a prescribed path of thought.

This paper showed that arguments that the crucifix was too deformed or too violent were weak since a precedent for such stark depictions of Christ in past religious paintings had been established. Furthermore, the surface treatment of the Richier Crucifix was an example of the style and content of postwar art based on the influence of the theories of existentialism. It was a witness to the chaotic world. After World War II many artists in Europe found the geometric order too limiting to reflect their particular psychological experiences, and in their search for a more intimate expression, turned to a looser and more gestural form of abstract painting. Art had the power to transform lives. But the Church was concerned that such transformations could not be controlled. Their opposition to the Richier work was motivated from the fear of loss of power and control.

From the ordinary goal to build a monument to the glory of God in a small church in France evolved an international controversy. Couturier believed that the Church was alienated from modern culture and that contemporary religious art was mediocre. In the journal *L'art Sacré*, which he edited, Couturier called for a return to the grand historical tradition of sacred art when it was the foremost masters of Western art, diverse and

revolutionary as they might be, that the popes and abbots entrusted to build the great monuments of Christendom.

Couturier hoped Assy would be an example of a liberation and a re-awakening of church art. He chose his artists without regard for their religious conviction.

Paraphrasing Delacroix, Couturier said, "Faith is no substitute for talent."¹ The talents of the time were using modern art forms. But for the Church, art was programmatic, and the Church used art specifically for the reinforcement and encouragement of church doctrine and spiritual matters. But Richier's image of Christ, while highly spiritual, did not necessarily reinforce Church doctrine. Indeed, it was read by many as a body victimized by Nazism. Given that the Church had done little or nothing to oppose the Nazis, the Richier Crucifixion was a double embarrassment.

The controversy at Assy was a turning point in twentieth century sacred art. It helped the Catholic Church be more open in incorporating modern art in new churches in France as witnessed by these Couturier-related churches. In 1949, Couturier worked with the Diocese of Besançon on the L'Église du Sacré-Coeur, Audincourt, to commission Léger to do a series of stained glass windows and Bazaine to work on the Baptistry. He was responsible for Matisse's decorative program for the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, and he worked together with LeCorbusier on a Dominican convent near Eveux-sur-L'Arbresle, Saint-Marie de la Tourette and the Nôtre-Dame-du-Haut, Ronchamp. Modern forms are now routinely used in churches, but it took Father Marie-Alain Couturier's bold commissionings at Assy to bring modern art forms into the church. Father Couturier grew to understand that transformation is not necessarily the same as transcendence. Art seeks not so much to transform as to transcend, but religion transcends to transform.

Endnote

1. Couturier, Sacred Art 36.



Fig. 1 Father Marie-Alain Couturier. (c. 1950). Photo. Yale. Couturier Collection, Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts.



Fig. 2 Nôtre-Dame de Toute Grâce. (1950). Photo. Plateau d'Assy, France.

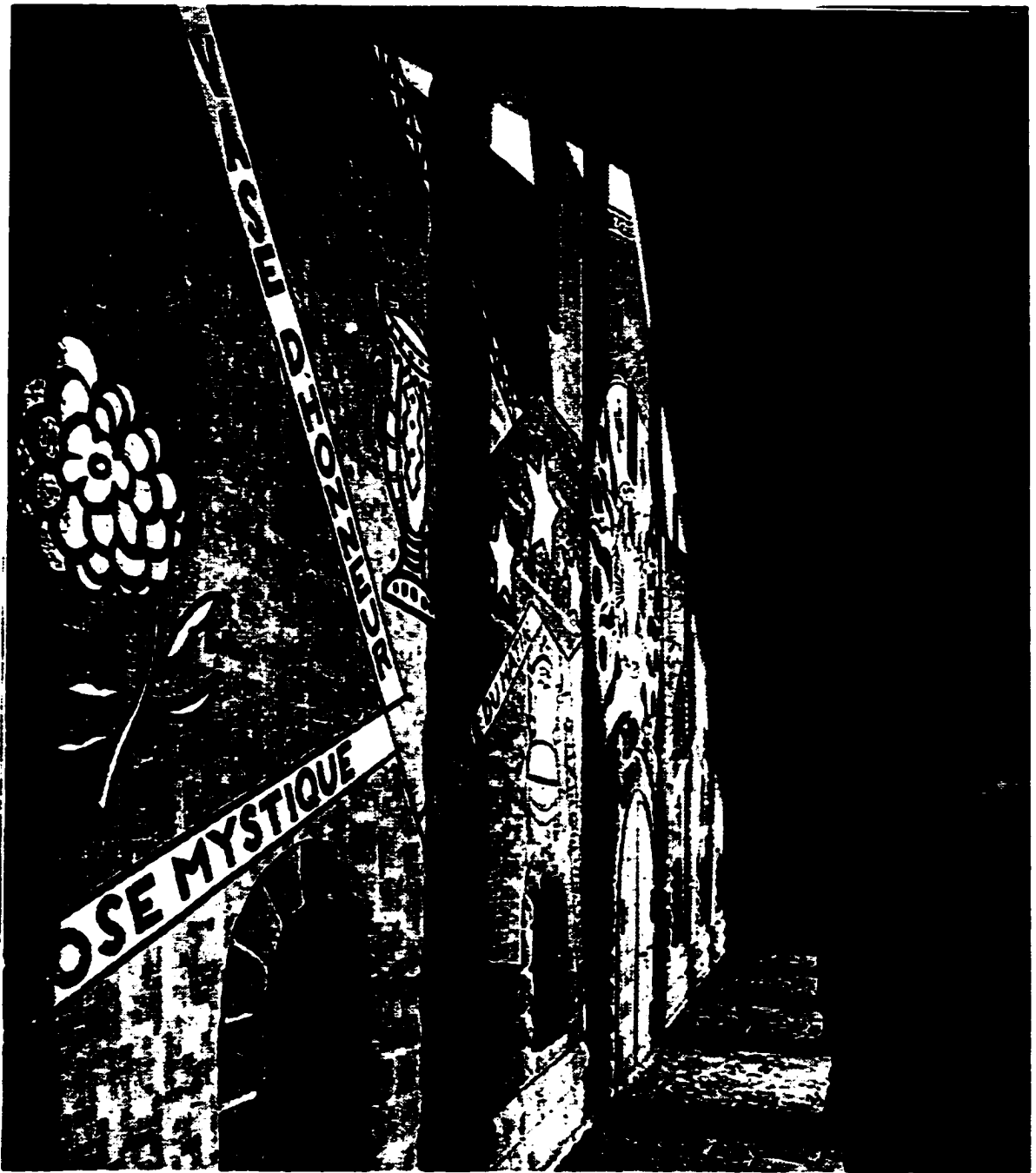


Fig. 3 Fernand Léger. (c. 1950). Mosaic Mural, 27.5 x 14.75m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre-Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 5 Fernand Léger. *Madonna Medallion*. (c. 1950). Tile, 152m2, Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre-Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 6 Demaison. *Wood Carvings*. (c. 1950). Oak, 2.4 x .24 x .29m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.

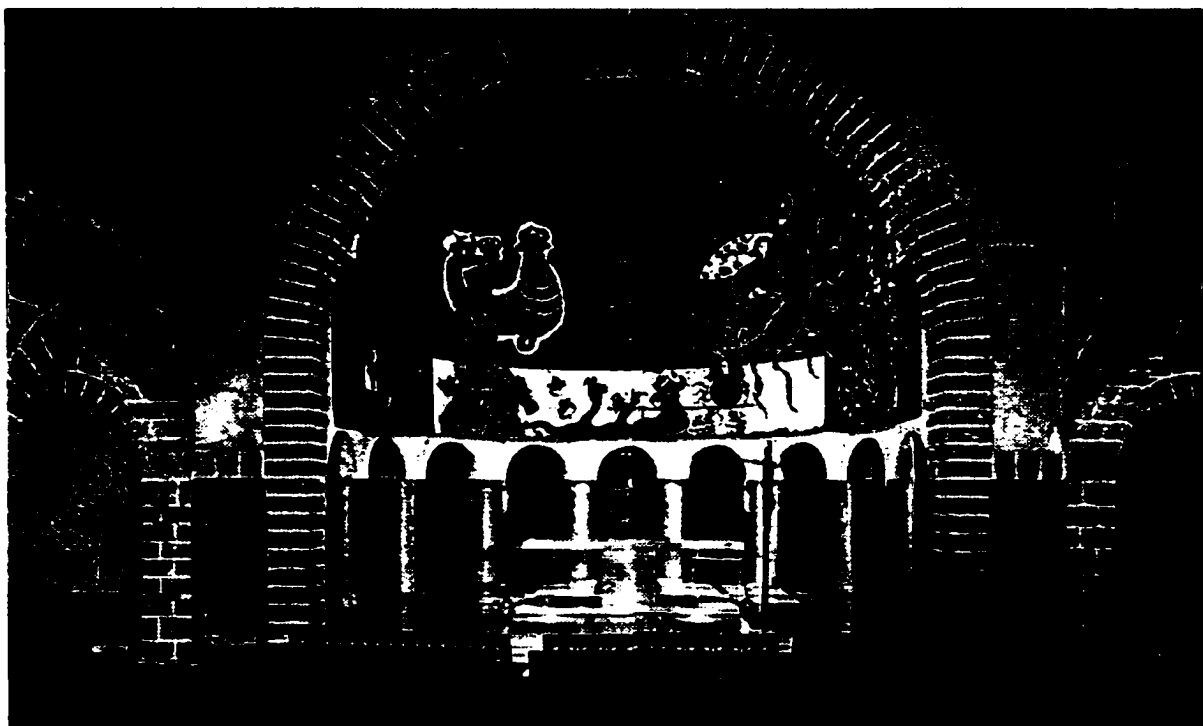


Fig. 7 Jean Lurçat. *Apocalypse*. (c. 1950). Tapestry, 12 x 4.66m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre-Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 8 Henri Matisse. *St. Dominic*. (c. 1950). Tile, 2.34 x 3 m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 9 Georges Braque. *Tabernacle*. (c. 1950). Bronze and oak, .6 x .49cm. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 10 Pierre Bonnard. *St. Frances of Sales*. (c. 1950). Oil on canvas, 1.89 x 2.16m.
Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 11 Georges Rouault. *Seated Christ or Insulted Christ*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .592 x .832m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 12 Georges Rouault. *Chastised Christ*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .592 x .832m.
Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 13 Georges Rouault. *Flowers*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .592 x .832m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 14 Georges Rouault. *Flowers*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .592 x .832m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 15 Georges Rouault. *Veronique*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .392 x .542m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.

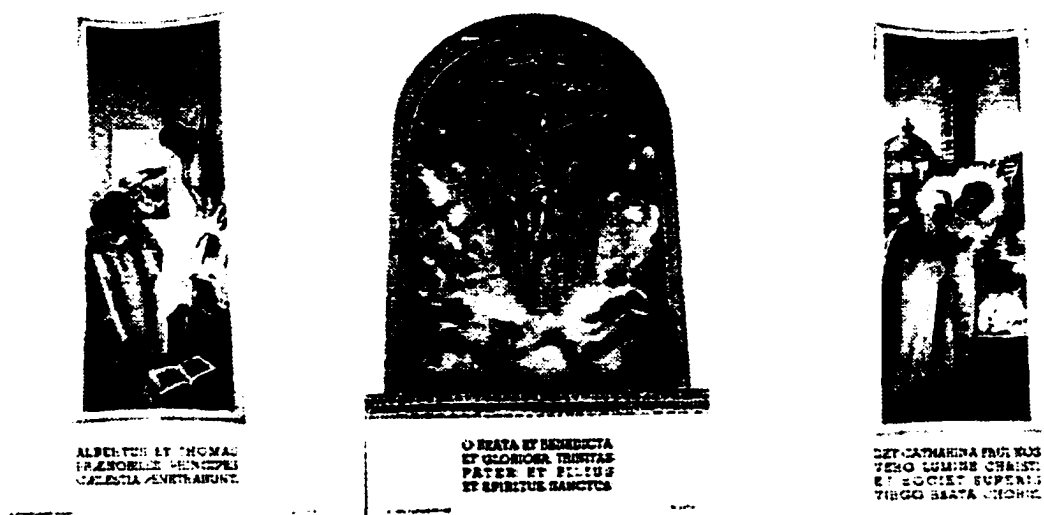


Fig. 16 Marie-Alain Couturier. Devotional Cards. (c. 1936). Paper, 12 x 7.3cm.

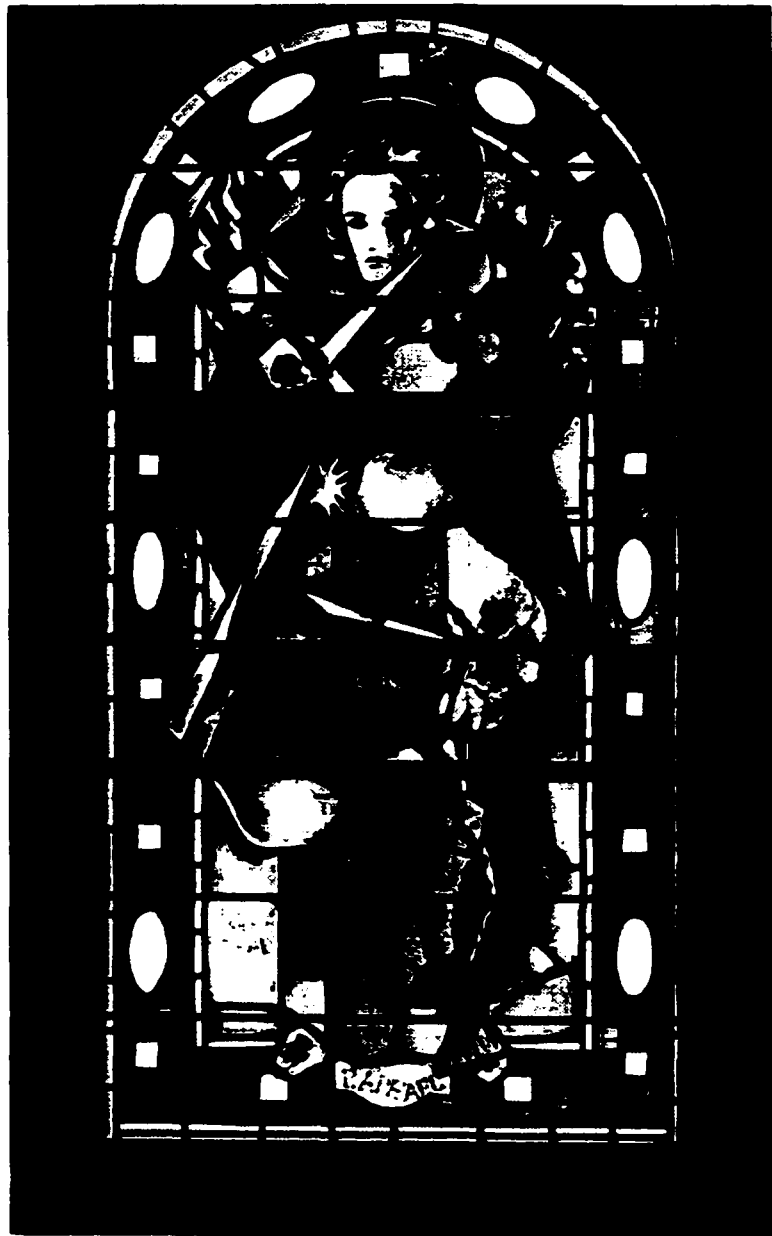


Fig. 17 Marie-Alain Couturier. *St. Raphael*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .93 x 1.9m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 18 Marie-Alain Couturier. *St Thérèse of Lisieux*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .93 x 1.9m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 19 Jean Bazaine. *King David*. (c. 1950). Stained glass, .535 x .93m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.

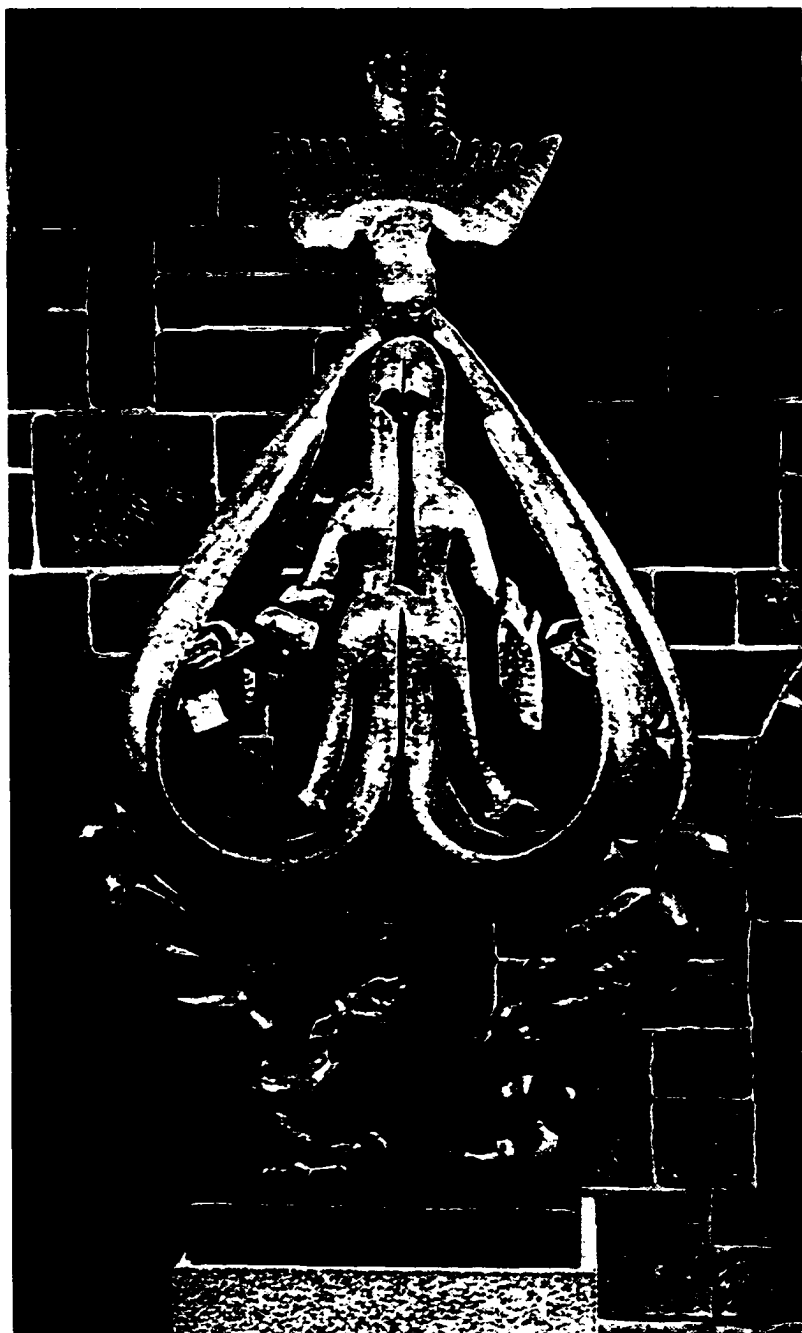


Fig. 20 Jacques Lipchitz. *The Madonna and the Spirit*. (c. 1950). Bronze, 2.35 x .71 x .71m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 21 Marc Chagall. *Moses Crossing the Red Sea*. (c. 1950). Tile, 2.34 x 3 m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 22 Marc Chagall. *Bas-Relief*. (c. 1950). Marble, 1.1 x .6m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.



Fig. 23 Marc Chagall. *Stained Glass Windows*. (c. 1950). Grisaille, .6 x 1m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.

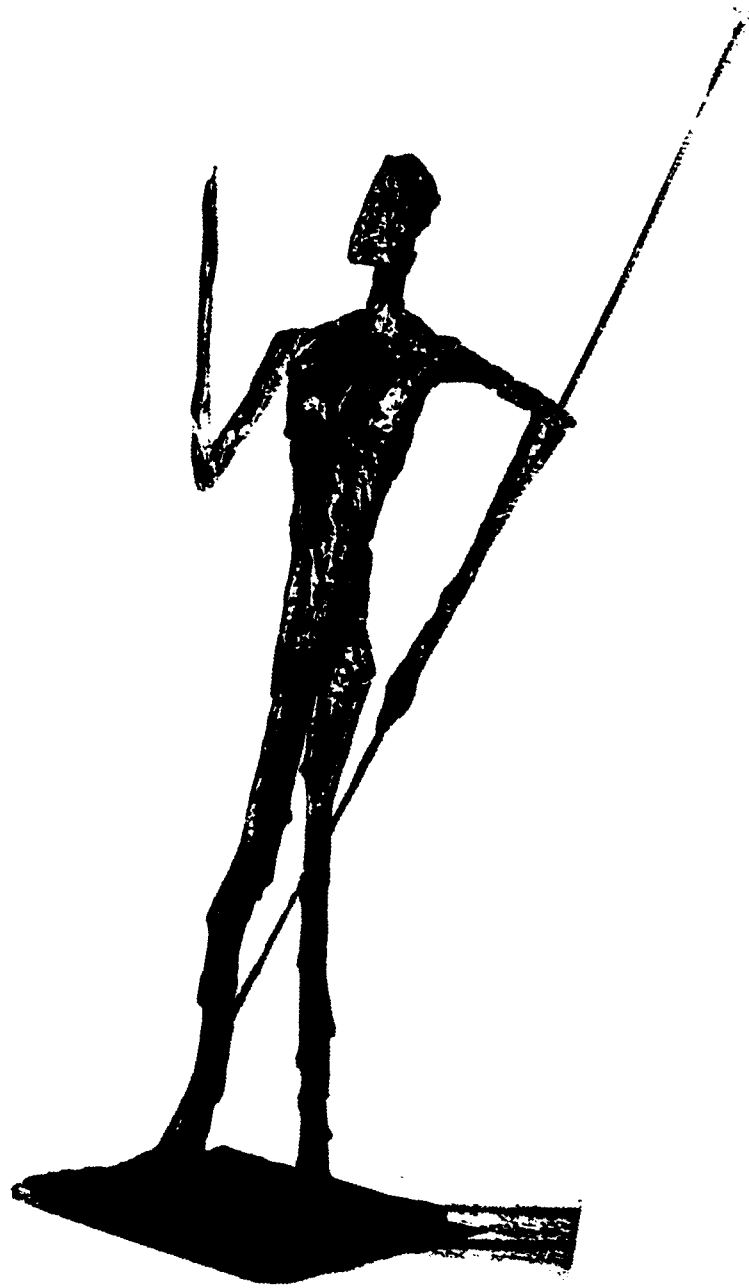


Fig. 24 Germaine Richier. *Don Quijote*. 1949. Bronze, 35cm. Private Collection.

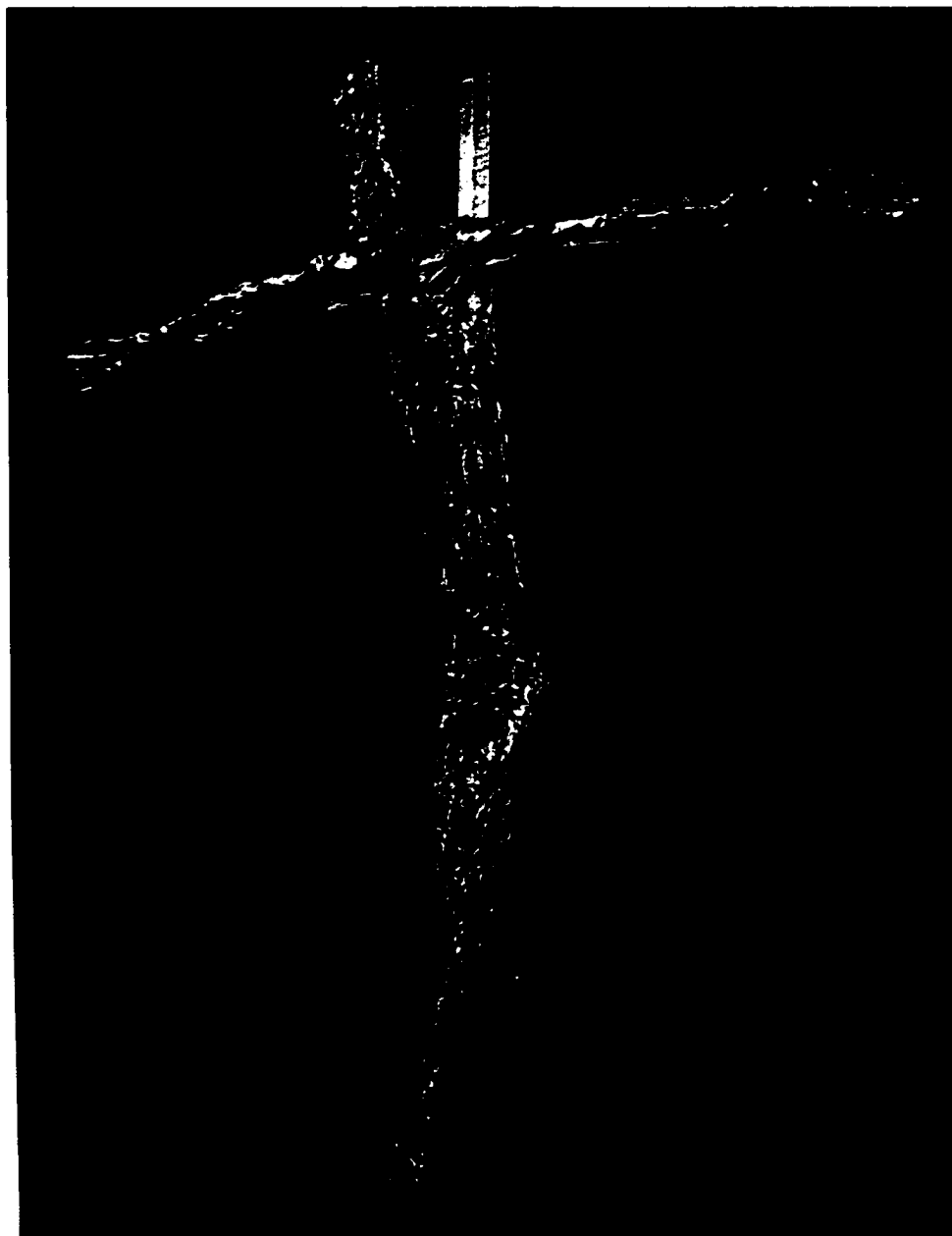


Fig. 25 Germaine Richier. *Crucifixion*. (c. 1950). Bronze, 1.5 x .369m. Plateau d'Assy, Nôtre Dame de Toute Grâce.

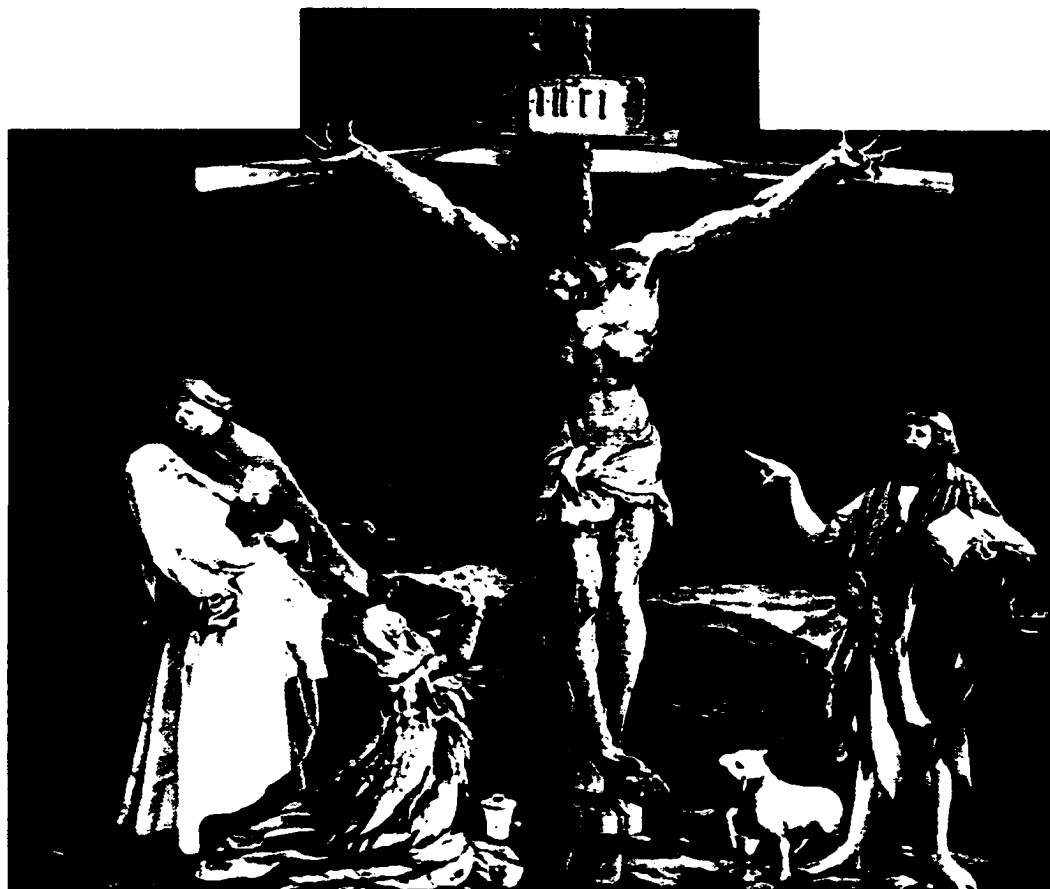


Fig. 26 Mathias Grünewald. *The Crucifixion*. 1510-16, o/limewood, 269 x 307cm, Colmar, France, Musée d'Unterlinden.



Fig. 27 Thomas Eakins. *Crucifixion*. 1880, O/c, 96 x 54", Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams.

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