

Zuzana ŠICKOVÁ - MEŠKOVÁ

## *Abstract Art in the Church*

*The present-day Church is subject to influences coming from the modern art-scene as well as from our more local cultural backgrounds. The human society as well as individuals is often unable to make a clear distinction between spiritual and cultural impetuses that are behind the visible products of our world. Thus, more and more often abstraction is used as a tool not only in our considerations but also in artistic representation in the newly built churches. Can we claim that the presence of abstract art in the Church is something good, and helps the believers in their search for God? What is behind the abstract art in the Church?*

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ABSTRACTION

In the dictionary of art we find that the word 'abstraction' refers to a common process of acquiring knowledge and its result where its individual elements become connected in a conception. Abstraction helps to understand objective reality more deeply, penetrates its substance and processuality.

In art, abstraction is understood as the deviation of the image from the reality which can be grasped through a common experience. This deviation concerns a whole system of forms and shapes and is one of the most fundamental conditions of an artistic reflection of reality, as well as of empirical, rational and emotional perception and consideration.

The transformation of the world may try to come closer, to approach reality or may try to lead to a bigger distance from it. Examples of expressing human experience of the world in a way which attempts to bring reality closer to the humans are offered to us by realism, verism or trompe l'oeil.

On the other hand, the example of distance from reality can be ornamentation or abstract art. But abstraction, as a distance from reality, does not mean a lack of connection or a less truthful representation of reality. Abstract art is just not concrete, not object-oriented, non-figurative or not "pure" art.

When people start to speak about modern art, they frequently think of art which breaks the connection with the artistic traditions of the past. In all church buildings, art is omnipresent. Even if we imagine an utterly modern church with a plain and white decoration, we soon realize that art is included in it.

Art in the church can be hidden in the shape of the altar,

in the shape of the windows, in the features of the pews or in the objects used during Eucharistic ceremony. The main problem of the new churches is a disharmonic perception between the possibilities and functions of art and the requirements of the Church.

### ABSTRACT ART IN SACRAL SURROUNDINGS

Some of the topics adopted from the Bible by the Christian culture as a constant motif for artists could be shown or be adapted to new circumstances. These can cause shock if they offer us a new perspective of a view.

In the year 1962, for example, the artist who really had the courage to play with such a sensitive motif as the "Three Studies of Crucifixion of Christ" was the non-religious British artist Francis BACON.

The abstract way of thinking about art of Francis BACON projects ruthless brutality and aggression. He connected art and the topics of Christianity in an uncommon way. The person in his depiction is deformed to an amorphous bunch of flesh.

There abstraction was a means of representation of the ideas of the artist, not the destination of his creative process. The main idea of his work, which used to be crucifixion, was substituted by a representation of the subjective emotions and trauma of a person that is about to die. Abstraction here was the only means of language to express the artist's idea.

Another example depicting a confrontation of the Church with modern art can be the chapel of *Notre Dame du Haut* in Vogeze, LE CORBUSIER's functional architectural construction (1955). This chapel inspired and influenced the construction of many other modern ecclesial buildings.

Another type of abstraction is the expressionist decoration of churches in the period after the Second World War. During these times, however, abstract art was used as a way of decoration, not as a way of shocking religious public.

French artist Alfred MANESSIER helped the abstract art to find its way into the artistic environment of the Church. Inspired by the medieval windowpanes, he created a poetic work full of formal features which suggested some relations to concrete subjects. The abstract element in this was the form of the transmission of the topic.



## ABSTRACT ART AND SPIRITUALITY

Today, modern art and religion are domains which often lead separate lives and are even disconnected from each other. The tendency is to view them as two completely different spheres of meditation and action. The commonplace point of view is that modern art and religion cannot be connected at all, nor can they become united in a final product.

People who are little familiar with potential interaction of modern art and religion often claim that these two spheres of human expression should be put into entirely different categories (anti-position), since their spiritual message is completely different or that they even can mediate opposite messages.

Our contemporary culture and society look at the modern art through the "glasses with a too profane filter", through which the spirituality of modern art appears to have a lesser value compared to the profound spiritual tradition of the historical Church.

As a consequence, collaboration between contemporary art with its abstract forms and elements on one hand and the spiritual message of the Christian Church on the other seems to be impossible to these people. The problem in this way of viewing reality is the perception of quality. In this setting the role of abstract art in today's Church is getting more and more marginalized. But, as a matter of fact, abstract art can mediate and call for a strong and high-level spirituality.

## FEARS AND DECORATION

There is yet another problem with abstract art and its function in the Church. We can describe it as a certain "fear" of using abstract art in the Church. There are many questions coming to mind connected to this. Many of them are linked with the disputed adequacy (or inadequacy) of abstract art as a medium of decoration of the stories on which Christianity is based and which are regarded as necessary sources of inspiration for a Christian artist.

Will abstract art thus be able to follow and embody the Biblical message of the Church? The historical tradition has strong rules. There is a certain kind of routine in the perception of art in the Church.

An application of figurative art in the Church refers to a certain kind of iconography, which has become a second-hand approach in the XXI century. With its features and patterns it might not be able to speak to the believers of the post-modern age in the same way as it did in the preceding centuries.

Even in cases where the tendency to implement abstract art in the Church can be felt, its function remains only as a medium of distance from reality, visible in *decoration*. When viewing and perceiving abstract art in a religious setting of today one usually looks for the messages of the old iconography to which we are accustomed.

If one is unable to find familiar messages, motives and



forms of representation, one has problems understanding what is behind the abstract representation. The fear of the unknown comes into the game. Thus, behind the refusal of abstract art, there often can be a hidden fear of accepting something new.

## MYSTERY, HARMONY AND ATMOSPHERE

Accepting new things and phenomena calls the viewer to be more active in perception, to look for an internal mirror which could provoke yet another concern: are we active enough in our perception of the world?

Can we represent ideas or topics rooted in a religious tradition in an abstract form and at the same time make them understandable? Can abstract art illustrate or symbolize a religious story? Abstract art, just like the stories of Christian spirituality, has the ability to talk through *allegory*.

It is often maintained that it is necessary to find a new language of art in the Church which would be based on contemporary conditions, on the present state of the world and the humankind with all its complexity. Reflecting the needs of

the actual world and rooting itself in the signs of the times abstract art adopted by the Church could talk to the human of our age. It could and can be a mediator of the Christian message like any other kind of art with a typical iconographical program.

Beyond the shapes of an abstract artefact produced for/in the Church, we should be able to discover and explore such fundamental imperatives of religious life as dialogue, proclamation, concretisation, mystery, harmony and atmosphere. The perception of abstraction is like the perception of music - an invisible river of allegory and message in one.

It may take some time until abstract art as one of the main characteristics of our age will find its way into a fruitful and more harmonious collaboration with the Church of our age, which is characterized by certain setting of priorities, structures, hopes and fears. Similarly it might prove to be an at times uneasy process for the Church to open up for artistic challenges which emerge from environments which might be for one reason or another alienated from the Church to some extent. Nevertheless the Church learns as it goes and it makes her proclamation up-to-date if she proves to be able to discern the signs of the times with their inspiration and freshness.

Then even silence can become more authentic, dialogue more intensive and message more comprehensive.

Zuzana ŠICKOVÁ-MEŠKOVÁ was born in 1977 in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. She is Roman Catholic, an assistant of French language at the Comenius University, Bratislava. She studied art education and French in Bratislava, and art history at the Blaise Pascal University in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Her individual exhibitions include *CROUS* in Clermont-Ferrand (June 2002) and *Con-Tiki* in Bratislava (December 2002). Her email address is [zuzkamesko@hotmail.com](mailto:zuzkamesko@hotmail.com).

