

Some Notes on the Reredos by the Artist, Mr. Sydney Goldsmith (c. 1967)

When an artist is given an opportunity to create a work of art for use in a liturgical context, two considerations immediately present themselves. On the one hand, the great works of religious art from the past, on the other, all the intervening theories and philosophies of art to the present. The artist, working today, cannot pretend to be unaware of contemporary attitudes to art, but there is not necessarily a conflict. Like the artist, the people who make up the congregation are also conditioned by a completely new range of visual experiences in day to day living. The artist does not have to communicate with a medieval mentality.

The reredos, still needing some refinement of detail, is an attempt to use art in the service of religion while recognizing the uniqueness of both kinds of experience, the esthetic and the spiritual. The function of the church as a place of worship must not be usurped for other purposes - such as a place to exhibit art. If the art introduces a distraction among the congregation then it has failed in its purpose. It should serve no other purpose than to enhance the spirituality of its surroundings. How well the reredos succeeds will only be known by the congregation to whom it becomes familiar over a period of time.

The artist has always been faced with the problem of representing three-dimensional reality on a flat surface. When this representation is made, a degree of abstraction is inevitable. William Blake, referring to this process said "Nature has no outline - imagination has." . It is the degree of this abstract content which makes the work wither acceptable or disturbing.

In the reredos, the flat composition is treated in a sculptured relief which brings the shapes closer to reality where objects define themselves both by the light they reflect and the shadows they cast. Relief techniques have been used from earliest times in various materials such as stone, wood or plaster. The material employed here is a plaster like substance made from cellulose fibre (the base from which celluloid, cellophane, and rayon are made). Its qualities of strength, chemical inertness, and adhesion make it most satisfactory for an application of this kind.

Because the shapes are not realised fully, "in the round" a degree of graphic abstraction is still necessary, such as the profile emerging from the full face to imply roundness.

When it was announced that the name of the church was to be, "St. Michael and All Angels" it became quite obvious what the theme of the reredos decoration must be. However it did not immediately resolve itself into the composition as it stands now. There were a few questions to ask. Should St. Michael occupy the centre of the design? Should other archangels be included, Raphael, Gabrielle? How many other Angels need there be to suggest "and All Angels"? And their posture?

After a number of sketches of several variations, the composition was finally established. The Chai-Rho, the sign of Christ, was placed centrally. The seven circles of the seven halos were arranged asymmetrically around it and the figures were placed inward in attitudes of prayer to form roughly triangular stability with the Chai-Rho at the apex.