

ARTHUR POLLEN

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THE English, we have always been told, are incurably literary. When they produce painters their work is illustrative; when they produce sculptors their work is linear. However true this may once have been, the attitude is changing now. Perhaps the very fact that such a statement has become stock has influenced the trend; artists are on their guard and the current art school bogey now is 'being literary'.

Our two acknowledged contemporary masters, Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore, are examples of the break-away from the literary. Illustration had bitten deeply into Sutherland in his early days. His Samuel Palmer-like observations ask to be clapped between the pages of a book; but this was only a stage in this artist's development which, quite soon, he left behind. Henry Moore never seemed even to need to push off from the literary bank before he was swimming vigorously in mid-stream. From the outset he seems to have grasped the essential quality of sculpture—the necessity to conceive it solid, and he has never been tempted towards the linear.

In religious art the illustration has had an honourable place. From medieval illuminations to eighteenth-century engravings there has been a continuous narrative stream. It has been balanced by monumental fresco and panel painting. In sculpture and carving, early work tended to be illustrative and concerned only with surface and silhouette. Later the Romanesque period compressed its forms to fit its architecture, but the full release came only in the Renaissance. After Michael Angelo all bounds were broken and the exuberant baroque, which superseded his classical restraint, was in its turn made to look mild beside the extravagances of the rococo. No wonder the modern reaction to all this acrobatic display swept all decoration whatsoever out of the church. The nineteenth century found the Church and the artist poles apart, and when, in this century, an artist arose with whom the Church had some hesitant contact, it was no wonder that he should have been of the restrained and linear kind, poetic and mystical, akin in many ways to the early carvers of ivories and extremely English. This, of course, was Eric Gill.

From the Gill school have sprung many lesser 'Gills', and with the exception of the lyrical Anthony Foster who is now evolving a style of his own, the lesser 'Gills' have got their master's mannerism, but not his spirit. He is a dangerous master to follow: so easy to copy his outer surface, so difficult to grasp his inner significance. Few of our religious sculptors have avoided the easy trap the Gill tradition offers. Arthur Pollen is one who has produced a really large output without apparently ever noticing that Gill existed. And this is curious because Pollen is as open-minded to great influences as anyone has ever been. It is a measure of his strength and also of his weakness that he is so sensitive to all the winds of heaven.

But like Henry Moore, whom he enormously admires, Pollen is absolutely certain of the importance of monumentality in sculpture. It does not matter if he is carving a piece of shale three inches long, or a life-size figure in limestone, the sculpturesque quality of weight and solidity is there. He sees everything three dimensionally, surface pattern only playing a secondary part. He would have been a good pupil to Masaccio or Piero della Francesca. Simple and strong, both these artists have combined grandeur and solemnity without the least swagger. Quietly and deliberately Pollen, too, goes about his work to achieve the same kind of held-in intensity of life.

In his life-size Irish limestone Madonna and Child, which he exhibited at the Ashley Gallery in the Spring, Pollen showed very clearly the wonder and the mystery of the Madonna idea confined within the heavy stoniness of the material. 'A great, big lump of grey stone' someone said, not too politely, about it. But they were getting near one of its important qualities, while entirely missing its significance. They saw its monumental and satisfying sculptural shape, but missed the look of tender relationship suggested by the intense gaze between Mother and Son. They missed the dignity and solemnity of the Madonna which checks any tendency towards sentiment by its grandeur. They missed the ethereal quality of the grey colouring that clothes the work in a soft ghostliness. All these things are not easy to appreciate at a first glance, but they are of the enduring kind that really count.

Part of Pollen's integrity is his refusal to play up to nature as a beauty. He never gets any effect that easy way. Even in his most Renaissance moods his vision is fixed on the ideal of structure

which, without any unnecessary description or compromise with prettiness, he is determined to explore to the limit. With the result that the beauties that emerge are integral to the form itself and not merely applied to its surface.

While visualising sculpture big, in the grand manner, Pollen sometimes achieves his best results in miniature. His shale carvings, tiny in scale like exhibits in the cases of the British Museum, are often full-size works in small. In these we can follow Pollen's eye, seeing his subject imprisoned, as it were, within the piece of natural stone. He humanises rock shapes.

Perhaps Pollen's natural medium is bronze. Along academic lines his portrait busts have brought him great credit both in the art world and in the world where likeness counts for more than aesthetics; his medallion head of Dr Downey even found admiration in a collector who owns a Pisanello. These works alone would not be enough on which to build a reputation, but there is a feeling for bronze in many of his formal works. If bronze were a medium easy to come by, and Pollen were to give a more articulated form to at least one of his crucifixes—whose bent limbs suggest the force and hardness of bronze—it would endow it with a vigour and strength impossible to brittle terracotta.

Some people have suggested that Pollen's work would be much easier to understand if he stuck to one style; the many facets, they maintain, are a distraction. In time the artist may find the perfect synthesis and his work may settle into a single form, but this process cannot be hurried without limiting the vision. Pollen's many-sidedness is an outcome of wide sympathies, 'For myself,' he says, 'I would like to be able to do art which combined the qualities of Brancusi, the negroes, the Mexicans, the Romanesque and Henry Moore'—and he ought to have added the High Renaissance.

To give Pollen's background I quote from the catalogue introduction that I compiled for his spring exhibition. . . . He was trained in the severe style of Harvard Thomas, and acquired a knowledge of naturalistic sculpture under this great master. He later worked with Frank Dobson and responded to his abstractions which led to Brancusi and Henry Moore, but his early feeling for Donatello and the Italian Renaissance caused his degree of abstraction, like Maillol's, to be of a classical nature. From his earliest days the two strains, abstract and naturalistic, grew together in

Pollen's work, harnessed one to the other. But at no point has he ever entirely loosed anchor from natural forms.

In that period, before five years of war service severed the artist's developing reputation into two parts, there were several works done for churches which reflected his double interest. The reredos relief in subiaco marble of St Thérèse of Lisieux in the London Oratory is an example of the natural or 'Renaissance' style. The wood carving of St Thomas More in the Kingsway church of SS. Anselm and Cecilia, and the stone carvings of the same saint and that of St John Fisher at Campion Hall, Oxford, reflect the formal style.

Passing from a portrait bust of Ronald Knox to an expressionistic crucifix presents no difficulties to Pollen, who does not believe that there exists any fundamental break between the traditional and the modern. When one remembers his half-figure Madonna and Child in the first Battersea Park open-air sculpture exhibition one begins to see that the link which one felt has been smashed between past Christian art and contemporary secular art, might really not be so irrevocably broken after all. Arthur Pollen's great task may well be to cement the two together.

Note. This article brings to an end the present series of articles on Christian artists, but Lindsay Clarke's new carving of Blessed Martin Porres, O.P., for Hawkesyard Priory, will be reproduced in the November issue of BLACKFRIARS.