

One last point of criticism. Although I do not find him too clear on the matter, Father MacLaren seems to imply that, although he believes the right to private property to be relative, it must be indefinitely upheld because no alternative is practical. This is a dangerous line of argument, because it must be proven from man's fallen nature. This has not been done and I do not think it can be done. And if it may be held that there is even an *a priori* possibility of a practical alternative, then the whole question passes from the hands of the theologian into the hands of the economist, whose business it is to judge of practicability. Therefore if we are to defend private property we must defend it as a moral right. Otherwise, it will go, and with it, I fear, the whole fabric of Christian civilisation.

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THE MASTER OF THE LIFE OF THE VIRGIN

THE realisation of the honour and devotion that are due to our Lady in Mediaeval and early Renaissance times, engendered a corresponding increase in pictorial representation of scenes from her life and the childhood of our Lord. It is not infrequent that the source of the inspiration and the materials are to be traced to the Apocryphal legends. The heretical trends they contain and the dubious authenticity of many of the accounts have long rendered them suspect in the eyes of the Church. Notwithstanding this, the mind of the mediaeval artist was particularly susceptible to the graphic and imaginative nature of some of the stories, besides they served to satisfy the desire for a greater knowledge of the small intimacies of the life of the Holy Family.

The arrival in London of the collection from the Munich Alte Pinakothek affords a unique opportunity to see the treasures for many people in this country; they will remain on view until August the 7th. The collection contains, among other things, part of a fifteenth century German altarpiece by an anonymous artist called 'The Master of the Life of the Virgin', this series being his greatest known work. It consists of eight panels representing 'Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate', 'The Birth of the Virgin', 'Her Presentation in the Temple' and the 'Marriage of the Virgin' in the upper row; 'The Annunciation', 'The Visitation', 'The Presentation in the Temple' and 'The Assumption of Our Lady' in the lower row. The unity of the series is now lost because of its dispersal—part permanently remains in England.

From those belonging to the Alte Pinakothek three are being shown at present, 'Joachim and Anna', 'The Birth of the Virgin'

and 'The Annunciation'. The most interesting of these is the first, both stylistically and in its grasp of religious significance; the two are closely intermingled.

A member of the German school, and active in Cologne, he came under the influence of the Flemish masters and ultimately under that of his compatriot Stefan Lochner. But it was the Flemish painters, notably Rogier van der Weyden and Dirk Bouts, who were to exert a humanising and beneficial influence over him. Born at the same time as Massaccio, Van der Weyden was in his late twenties when Van Eyck visited Lisbon on a mission for the Duke of Burgundy, and although a contemporary of the Van Eycks he displays a vision that in many respects might be considered in opposition to them; especially Jan. The modernity of his approach did not touch Rogier and it was this that made him a fitting person to influence the German. The striving after a formula for the interpretation of tactile values, and the textural richness that enhanced and underlined the mystical intensity of Van Eyck contributed to the disparity that existed between them, Van der Weyden remained apart from the naturalism of the other. In him all was concentrated upon the figure and everything was subordinated to that end, his landscapes were of secondary importance and were present in that they helped to maintain the synthesising activity that formed the basis of his art: an example of this is in the 'Baptism of Christ' in the Berlin Museum, or an extreme case, that of his 'Crucifixion' in the Johnson Collection in the Philadelphia Museum; in the latter all detail has been reduced to the minimum and everything is gathered together before the stark reality of Calvary.

Dirk Bouts continued in the same tradition and was about fifteen years younger than Van der Weyden. Although naturalism advanced further in him, in that his landscapes were more convincing, his figures were always in the world but not of it. They were caught up in a vision of eternity and this state bestows a remote serenity upon them. This contemplative character, the inward tranquillity, is in direct opposition to the rather brutal (for want of a better word) character of much German Gothic art in which there is an evident preoccupation with the melancholy, grotesque and the macabre, resulting sometimes in a denial of the essential dignity of man's nature—such a failure is implicit in the coarse and gross delineation of the forms.

This indictment is not applicable to the Master of the Life of the Virgin, instead it is the marriage of what is best in the German school and the humanity of the Flemish artists' vision that makes his work beautiful and delightful. In 'Joachim and Anna at the

Golden Gate' the heads are reminiscent of Dirk Bouts; Joachim and Anna are filled with joy at the immensity of God's gift to them, but this is conveyed by the tenderness of the figures, not by any dramatic gesture; there is a complete absence of dramatic tension. The whole is stated with engaging simplicity and directness.

It is conceived in the form of continuous representation; in the distance on the left of the picture Joachim is with his hireling surrounded by sheep, giving orders for the sacrifice that is to be offered on the morrow in thanksgiving. Later in the middle distance he encounters the angel, who is clad in a white raiment, and his wings are of a rainbow hue culminating in peacocks' feathers, the execution of which is superb, and the inclusion of such a naïve detail does much to add to the endearing qualities of the work. In the foreground he is embraced by Anna outside the golden gate of the temple—it is the consummate manner in which the spiritual joy of the embrace is realised and depicted that makes the whole so exquisite.

Recession in the landscape is achieved by means of varying shades of pure colour. In the far distance the mountains and the city upon them are a pale ultramarine blue; the very coldness of the colour is expressive of distance. In the middle distance the hills, which at this point become softer and more undulating, are painted in emerald greens of different intensity. The contours of these areas are sharp and display the metallic surface that predominates in Gothic art, but it assists forcibly in the transmission of an atmosphere of mystery. On approaching the foreground all is changed and once more the influence of the Flemish asserts itself; to the left are grassy hummocks, the quality of the paint is liquid, the grass assumes a lushness that is astounding; also the pond which it encloses shows the same naturalism, the grass now is painted a rich, mellow green; the same is true of that on the little rocky borders that are on the bank of the moat surrounding the temple. A swan floats peacefully on its surface, two figures are engaged in conversation on the bridge across the moat. The temple itself is placed on the extreme right of the composition. A highly imaginative structure, it is conceived in a wholly two-dimensional manner; elaborate Gothic tracery adorns the portals in fascinating patterns, the bricks on the walls are treated with infinite care but there is no pretence at the recording of volume. The same can be said of Anna's dress: the fabric is yellow-gold with a black pattern superimposed upon it; there is no real attempt at making it conform to the direction of the folds. Joachim is consistently represented throughout clad in a rose-coloured mantle over a tunic of Prussian

blue. The triumph of the archaic occurs in the sky, which is pure gold leaf.

However, it is not the technical composition or the juxtaposition of colours that is ultimately significant in this panel, except in so far that they reflect the inner harmony; its strength and glory lie in the convincing portrayal of two souls in communion with God.

M. SHIRLEY.

OBITER

IT IS ALL TOO EASY for people today to get hot under the collar at the mention of the Soviet. There is much to incite irritation and defiance in the behaviour of the U.S.S.R. But anger prevents a reasoned and objective study of the facts about Russia. A Quarterly which cuts away from the topical political scene to study quietly the social and economic institutions of this enormous and novel experiment at socialisation is to be welcomed; and such is *Soviet Studies*, edited on behalf of a special department of Glasgow University by J. Miller and R. A. J. Schlesinger (Blackwell: 7s.6d. an issue; 25s. per annum). There is little danger of its being crypto-communist, though who knows what sort of pressure the editors may have to resist. In the Editorial note to the first number (June 1949) some of the difficulties of such an undertaking are suggested.

The U.S.S.R. offers its own peculiar difficulties as a field of study due to the difficulty of access for the foreign student, both to the country and to sources of information regarding it. On the other hand, the Soviet Union offers advantages. . . . As a highly self-conscious society it produces an unusually large body of statements about its own aims, methods and achievements which, whatever critical analysis they require, are a valuable source of evidence, if only as the verbal element in the machinery of government and cohesion.

Readers will have to study with their eyes open. The first article, 'From Munich to Moscow', is by E. H. Carr, a fact that may not encourage every reader. The bulk of the Quarterly is taken up with 'Reports and Commentaries' and 'Reviews' which will be found to be of great value.

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THOSE INTERESTED in international documentation should turn even more readily and more securely to Abbé R. Kothen's *Fiches Documentaires*, published by E. Warny, 2 Rue Vésale, Louvain (120 francs for 1949 issues). This amounts to a collection of upwards of 10 leaflets in a folder every month, each leaflet containing the text of some important pronouncement from the Holy See, noteworthy