



POPE PAUL VI AND JACQUES MARITAIN: THE RENEWAL OF SACRED ART BETWEEN FRANCE AND ITALY (1945-1973)

EXHIBITION'S SECTIONS

JACQUES MARITAIN, AMBASSADOR IN ROME AND HIS MEETING WITH MONSIGNOR MONTINI

Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Republic, appointed Jacques Maritain **French Ambassador to the Holy See** in April 1945. The philosopher moved to Rome with his wife Raïssa and sister-in-law Véra Oumançoff, and remained in the city until 1948. At the time, the embassy was located in the Palazzo Taverna complex, in the heart of the historic centre, not far from Ponte Sant'Angelo and the Vatican. It was during this fruitful three-year period that Maritain founded and ran the cultural **centre of Saint Louis**, affiliated with the Institut Français – which is still active in the intellectual life of the Italian capital. Most importantly, he resumed contact with the future Pope Paul VI, then Monsignor **Giovanni Battista Montini**, whom he had met in Paris in 1924 and who had become a leading figure in the Secretariat of State of Pope Pius XII, where he had assumed the position of Pro-Secretary of State.

From the beginning of his consecrated life, Montini had shown a keen interest and a deep interpretative sense of contemporary art, maturing in the 1930s some aesthetic considerations on the future of sacred art. At the same time, Montini had followed with great attention the developments of philosophical thought in France during the first half of the century, which had produced a series of fervent conversions to Catholicism, as in the case of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, baptised in 1906.

Montini was described by Paul Poupard as “a culture enthusiast” who, with “Augustinian acuity”, felt the need for the mediation of culture in modern society and Catholicism: a vast and varied dimension, not elitist but open to all, which would contribute to shaping the world of the future.

In this vein, since the mid-1920s, Montini had read some fundamental texts of Maritain's thought, such as *Art et Scolastique* (1920) and *Religion et culture* (1930), while in 1928 he had edited the Italian translation of *Trois réformateurs: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau*, for which he also wrote an introduction. It was in 1948, during Maritain's stay in Rome, that the two began a correspondence that continued until the philosopher's death in 1973.

SACRED ART IN FRANCE BETWEEN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES: THE EXPERIENCES OF ÉMILE BERNARD, MAURICE DENIS AND ALEXANDRE CINGRIA TOWARDS A RENEWED RELIGIOUS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

In the last decades of the 19th century, a renewed interest in sacred art began to spread in France. Following the path opened up in the middle of the century by Delacroix in the church of Saint Sulpice in Paris, artists and intellectuals felt the need to move towards new perspectives that could innovate and renew the language of religious art. The central theme, born out of the Romantic era, became the idea of transmitting an authentic sense of the sacred, capable of moving and touching the faithful in an empathetic way.

This was the context in which **Émile Bernard**, **Maurice Denis** and **Alexandre Cingria** emerged, exemplary figures in the evolutionary process that began at the end of the century and continued, in different forms and sometimes with divergent ideals, throughout the following century. Much loved and deeply understood by Jacques Maritain, Bernard and Denis were both members of the Symbolist group known as *Les Nabis* (from the Hebrew word *nabi*, for “prophets”), whose specific aim was to find a new vocabulary of colours and forms to express the sacred, drawing on Post-Impressionist influences. Aware of the importance of rebuilding a high-quality educational framework for liturgical art and craftsmanship, in 1919, together with the painter Georges Desvallières, Denis founded the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*. This was a kind of school-community focused as much on the production of works of art as on the creation of a believing and spiritually active community.

The Swiss Catholic **Alexandre Cingria**, author of the 1917 essay *La décadence de l'art sacré*, was an artist and intellectual of broad horizons, expert in the design of polychrome stained glass windows. He was a central figure in the renovation of churches between Geneva and the Canton of Ticino, initiating a neo-medieval course that would lead to the works created in those same territories by Gino Severini from 1924 onwards. In the same year that Denis founded the *Ateliers*, Cingria created an even closer-knit community in Geneva: the *Groupe de Saint-Luc et Saint-Maurice*, which later became the *Swiss Groupe de Saint-Luc*.

Both the community-operative based approach pursued by these artists and their conviction that authentic Christian art had to be based on an equally sincere, free and essential sense of faith found deep resonance with the thinking of Jacques Maritain, who published the first edition of *Art et Scolastique* in 1920 on these very same premises.

SACRED ART IN MARITAIN'S VISION: GEORGES ROUAULT, MARC CHAGALL, GINO SEVERINI AND JEAN COCTEAU

For Maritain, heir and updater of Thomist thought, there is an intimate relationship between the expression of beauty and spiritual experience. At the same time, artistic activity is “a virtue of the practical intellect” that presupposes both manual experience and culture. In this sense, art always relates to the world in a profound and essential dimension of “spiritual contemporaneity”.

Exceptional interlocutors in the central years of the Maritains' life, as well as recipients of extensive correspondence, Rouault, Chagall and Severini were bound by a sincere and lasting friendship with the philosopher and his wife Raïssa. The three masters understood and interpreted

Maritain's thought more than anyone else and, conversely, their artistic vision helped to shape and broaden the reference framework for the philosopher, who, after *Art et scolastique* (1920), moved on to *L'intuition créatrice dans l'art et dans la poésie* (1953) and *La responsabilité de l'artiste* (1960).

Rouault was probably the artist closest to Maritain, and mutual influence between the two has been the subject of numerous studies. They met shortly after the philosopher's conversion, and in 1910 Maritain wrote an introduction to the painter's work under a pseudonym, demonstrating that he already understood the full potential and authenticity of Rouault's work, expressed above all in his search for a new representation of Christ in a contemporary and deeply moving manner.

Raïssa, née Oumançoff, a poet of Russian origin and Maritain's fellow student at the Sorbonne, became enthusiastic about the work of **Chagall**, who, like her, was of Jewish origin; with him, in 1948 she produced a volume of verse and prose entitled *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté*.

For **Severini** and his wife, their encounter with the Maritains marked the beginning of a new artistic and spiritual journey: Jacques himself would encourage the painter to take part in the competition for the decoration of the church of Semsales in Switzerland in 1924, opening a new season dedicated to the decoration of churches in Switzerland and Italy.

In his writings, Maritain also addressed the fundamental theme of the artist's freedom, rejecting subordination to politics and religious authority but at the same time highlighting the **"moral responsibility of the artist"**, who cannot be accountable to himself alone, since art is always deeply connected to society and collective needs.

These aspects of Maritain's thinking immediately resonated with Montini's ideas about the functions and value of contemporary art in the religious and social spheres. It is no coincidence that many works by artists close to the Maritains were included in the **Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art** commissioned by St. Paul VI and inaugurated in 1973 in the Vatican Museums, only a few months after the philosopher's death.

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On that occasion and in the years immediately preceding the opening of the Collection to the public, the "Cercle d'études Jacques et Raïssa Maritain" donated a series of particularly significant works to the Pope, such as the watercolour and ink drawing that the poet and artist **Jean Cocteau** had donated and dedicated to the Maritains in memory of his conversion to Christianity, which took place under their spiritual influence in 1925.

SACRED ART IN FRANCE AFTER WORLD WAR II: THE VISION OF COUTURIER

A Dominican friar, partisan during the war, artist, and later art critic and theorist, Father **Marie-Alain Couturier** (1897–1954) was one of the leading figures in the revival of religious art in France in the 1940s and 1950s.

He arrived in Paris in 1919 and took part in the *Ateliers d'art sacré* recently founded by Maurice Denis, but it was not until 1930 that he joined the Dominican order. Six years later, he took over the reins of the journal *L'Art Sacré*, which, thanks to his commitment and that of his confrere Pie Régamey, became a hub of ideas and a privileged forum for debate on the renewal

of sacred art in France, with particular reference to the problem of decorating ancient and modern churches.

A friend of Denis, Chagall, Rouault, but also of Bazaine, Manessier, Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Léger, and a great supporter of Le Corbusier, the Dominican priest was also a frequent visitor to the Maritains' circle.

Couturier's vision was in some ways antithetical to that of Maritain, although the two always maintained cordial relations and held each other in high esteem. For Couturier, the artist's faith was not a necessary requirement for the creation of an authentic Christian work of art. Even non-believing or non-practising artists could devote themselves to the creation of sacred art at the highest level. The Dominican's focus was entirely on the artistic process: what counts is the genesis and development of the work and, of course, in accordance with the ancient tradition of the Order of Preachers, the guidance of enlightened patrons who are able to clarify the objectives to be achieved to the artist on a case-by-case basis. From this perspective, the primary element is the quality of the artist and his ability to interpret the issues of his time, together with the quality of the commission.

Among the many projects undertaken by Couturier in French churches, a prime example is the creation of the **Chapelle du Rosaire** de Vence, in Provence, designed by **Henri Matisse** between 1948 and 1951, one of the greatest examples of "total work of art" of the second half of the 20th century, also evident in the Matisse Room of the Vatican Museums.

Other projects, such as the decoration of the church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce on the Plateau d'Assy on Mont Blanc, met with strong opposition in Catholic circles in France and Italy, mainly because of the involvement of many atheist and communist artists.

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The important and unparalleled achievements resulting from French Dominican commissions in the middle decades of the twentieth century attracted the interest of Paul VI, who, during the establishment of the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art, adopted a broad and inclusive approach, attentive both to Maritain's philosophical principles and to the extraordinary results of Father Couturier's endeavours.

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: PAUL VI AND MARITAIN'S CONTRIBUTION

The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, convened by John XXIII on 25th January 1959, was opened in Rome on 11th October 1962 by the same Pontiff, a few months before his death. The subsequent sessions were convened and presided over by Pope Montini, elected to the papal throne on 21st June 1963, who solemnly closed the proceedings on 8th December 1965 on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

As observed by various scholars, it can be argued that the influence exerted by Jacques Maritain's thought on the ideas of the Council was vast and pervasive. Consider, in particular, the idea of an "integral Christian humanism" put forward by Maritain in the years preceding the Council, which finds a precise correspondence and almost a realisation in the documents *Dignitatis humanae*, *Nostra aetate* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

At the end of the last conciliar session on 8th December 1965, on the parvis of St Peter's Basilica, Paul VI, assisted by his secretary Monsignor Pasquale Macchi, distributed the final messages of the Council, intended for various areas of human life, to the main representatives of the Catholic world.

The *Address to Men of Thought and Science*, defined by Paul VI as “seekers after truth”, “explorers of man, of the universe and of history” was placed in the hands of Jacques Maritain. “Your road is ours”, said the Pontiff. “Your paths are never foreign to ours. We are friends of your vocation as searchers, companions in your fatigues, admirers of your successes”. And to Maritain, the Pope declared, handing him the parchment: “The Church is grateful to you for your life's work”.

The *Address of Pope Paul VI to Artists* was entrusted to three figures: the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, the composer Gian Francesco Malipiero and another French philosopher directly involved in the council sessions with the special role of “lay observer”, Jean Guitton (1901-1999), a student of Bergson like Maritain but who held dissimilar positions on certain matters. In the last years of his life, Guitton also devoted himself with some success to painting.

But it is to Maritain's thought that the conciliar letter addressed to artists makes clear reference: “This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man and is that precious fruit which resists the wear and tear of time, which unites generations and makes them share things in admiration. And all of this is through your hands. May these hands be pure and disinterested. Remember that you are the guardians of beauty in the world”, Paul VI exhorted with great effectiveness.

It was the beginning of a new path of reconciliation between art and the Church, anticipated the previous year, in 1964, by the meeting between the Pontiff and artists in the Sistine Chapel, which would lead to the formation of the Vatican Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art.

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JACQUES MARITAIN AND WILLIAM CONGDON: AN AMERICAN IN ASSISI

The American painter William Congdon (1912-1998) met Maritain in Paris in 1960, a year after Congdon's momentous conversion to Christianity which came after years of incessant wandering around the world and was consecrated by his baptism in Assisi on 29th August 1959.

From that year on, the painter, a follower of Abstract Expressionism and friend of Pollock, Rothko and De Kooning, took up permanent residence in the city of Francis with the lay community of Pro Civitate Christiana founded by Father Giovanni Rossi.

Maritain, genuinely fascinated by his introverted personality and experiences, agreed to write the preface to the artist's first monograph written after his conversion, published in Assisi in 1961. “With him, as with Rouault – wrote Maritain – I felt that astonishing resemblance between the man and the work which is characteristic of genuinely great artists”. Congdon, for his part, felt Maritain's closeness as a great “cosmic embrace”.

The American painter was one of the few artists outside Europe to have attracted the

attention and full support of the French philosopher, and that this closeness reflects Maritain's openness, during the 1960s, towards art with less figurative outcomes and, at the same time, towards broader social issues, close to the themes of the Second Vatican Council, as in *The Responsibility of the Artist* (1960).

Congdon's complete dedication to the expression of Christian spirituality could not fail to meet with the philosopher's admiration, even though both were well aware, in their correspondence, of the dangers of such a radical, almost ascetic choice of life.

Pope Montini also proved to be an admirer of Congdon's work, as evidenced not only by the inclusion of *Immaculata IV* in the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art, but also of a second work, *Crucifix No. 16*, in the Pontiff's personal collection, which was later bequeathed to the Vatican Museums.

THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE MARITAINS

The last section of the exhibition is dedicated to a number of intellectuals, both lay and consecrated, who played a particularly important role in the cultural life of the 20th century and whose journey, together with that of other thinkers and artists of the time, was significant for the development of Jacques Maritain's vision, also in opposite directions.

The series of portraits presented in this section, three of which are by Jean Guitton, is part of a large group that arrived at the Vatican Museums in 1979, following the exhibition “**Witnesses of the Spirit**”, dedicated to autographs of the 20th century. The exhibition was organised by the Museums in collaboration with the Vatican Apostolic Library, in homage to Paul VI and to the men and women of culture and faith whom the Pontiff had most appreciated during the “short twentieth century”. Among these were, of course, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, with some autographed letters, a photo of Raïssa, and the portrait of Jacques on display in the first section of the exhibition.

Henri Bergson (1859–1941), a pillar of twentieth-century philosophy, entered the lives of Jacques and Raïssa in 1901, when the two were still students at the Sorbonne. Through their mutual friend Charles Péguy, they started attending the philosopher's lectures at the Collège de France. The importance of the metaphysical and spiritualist approach of Bergson's thought, although agnostic, was decisive in Maritain's formation, together with the prominent role he gave to intuition.

Together with Maritain, a leading figure in French Catholic thought was **Maurice Blondel** (1861–1949), whose philosophical system, often associated with Modernism in the Catholic Church, was well known to Maritain. The latter appreciated its anti-positivist methodological vigour, although he did not share his immanentism expressed, for example, in *L'Action* (1893).

Along the same lines as the Maritains, particularly with regard to the vision of the link between art and faith and of faith as necessary to art, was their friend, the poet **Paul Claudel** (1868–1955, younger brother of the brilliant sculptor Camille), who had embraced Catholicism in 1886 and whose conversion was an inspiration to the couple. Claudel also intervened in the debate on the decline of sacred art initiated by Alexandre Cingria in 1917, stating that the main

cause of the phenomenon was to be found in the “divorce between faith and the forces of imagination”, thus showing that he fully shared Maritain’s thinking at that time.

Another point in common between Claudel and the Maritains was their great appreciation of the work of **Paul Valéry** (1871–1945), the celebrated master of symbolist poetry and, from 1925, member of the Académie française, but also a keen investigator of the “life of the spirit” and the author of profound works such as *Regards sur le monde actuel* (1931).

Charles Journet (1891–1975), a theologian from Fribourg, friend and correspondent of Maritain, was the mind behind the artistic renewal in Swiss churches and one of the patrons of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* founded by Alexandre Cingria. In 1924, Cingria and Maritain introduced him to Gino Severini, with whom he immediately established a good feeling, also from a theoretical point of view; Journet chose him as the leading artist for the commissions he oversaw between 1924 and 1934 in the churches of Semsales, La Roche, Fribourg, Tavannes and Lausanne. His activity as a theologian and patron continued in the following years and he was particularly appreciated by Montini who, after becoming Pope, elevated him to the rank of Cardinal in 1965.