

was leaving for New York and he looked down, waving to me from his window on the fourth floor.”

Father Alexander was invariably sustained by the Church, by his home, and by the fullness of his family happiness: “The ‘family’ transcends any relationships; it is not the goal but the source and the strength which feeds life.” Christ’s injunction that, in order to follow Him, we must leave our family and possessions applies only when they become “idols.” Rather, “‘Leaving’ one’s family,” he writes, “is its resurrection, its cleansing, its transfiguration, but not its annihilation...distribute, leave, all is positive, all is light and not darkness and destruction.” Homecoming is the process of leaving and joining the One who is arriving, and Father Alexander’s resolution to exile and rootlessness is spiritual, nonterritorial, and atemporal. Shortly before his death, in the final entry to his *Journals*, he wrote, “What happiness it has all been!”

Images of Perfection and Transcendence

MARY E. SLAYTON

The Image of Christ, by Gabriele

Finaldi; with an Introduction by Neil MacGregor and contributions by Susanna Avery-Quash, Xavier Bray, Erika Langmuir, Neil MacGregor, and Alexander Sturgis, *London: National Gallery; New Haven: Distributed by Yale University Press, 2000. 224 pp.*

IN JULY 1873 the Russian composer Modest Moussorgsky (1839?-1881), suffering from fits of depression, was struck a cruel blow when his friend Victor

Hartmann, an artist and architect, died at the age of thirty-nine. Learning that other admirers of the painter planned to exhibit his drawings and watercolors in Saint Petersburg, Moussorgsky loaned them pictures by Hartmann from his collection. When the exhibition opened in February 1874, the composer strolled through the gallery gazing at sketches the artist had drawn during a tour of Europe funded by a scholarship from the Imperial Gallery. A castle in Italy, a market in Limoges, Roman catacombs in Paris caught his eye. Deeply moved, Moussorgsky transformed his impressions of ten of Hartmann’s drawings into a suite for the piano.

Moussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* profoundly affected European music and art devotees, especially in France, where it electrified the City of Lights in the summer of 1913 and captivated Claude Debussy. Ten years later, on May 3, 1923, Maurice Ravel’s orchestration of the piano suite premièred triumphantly at the Concerts Koussevitzky in Paris and, three years afterwards, in Boston.

The last of Hartmann’s paintings rendered into music by Moussorgsky, *The Great Gate of Kiev*, is an architectural design for a structure of great antiquity, a triumphal arch commemorating Czar Alexander II’s narrow escape from assassination in a bomb incident on April 4, 1866, in Saint Petersburg. Hartmann’s imaginative creation embraces a figure of the Archangel Michael, a chapel, and a liturgical text in Old Church Slavonic carved over the archway: “Blessed he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

Had the insurrectionists plotting the Revolution of 1917, and all they would do after dethroning the Czar of “Holy Russia,” contemplated *The Great Gate of Kiev*, or other drawings like it, as intently as did Moussorgsky, and incorporated the

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“Idea of the Holy” into their grand design, they and untold others might have been more fortunate. But, having “better” things to do than gaze at pictures at an exhibition, they made a tragic miscalculation.

While church bells in the Soviet Union did not even faintly toll their chimes, many of Russia’s religious paintings and holy icons traveled to other countries as works of art move from private homes into public galleries, from places of worship into the marketplace as, during and after World Wars I and II, art treasures disappeared and re-appeared. Thus the twentieth century that “opened with a series of novel works in Italy and Switzerland, France, Germany, and Russia, paintings that radically rejected any aim of resembling nature,”¹ seemed destined to close with the arts in a state of flight as wild and erratic as that of Moussorgsky’s rendition of Hartmann’s Baba-Yaga, the witch who eats human bones ground into a paste with mortar and pestle and rides through the midnight skies.

In stunning refutation of such a dire prediction, the millennial exhibition “Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ,” held at the National Gallery in London, from February 26 to May 7, 2000, and the book accompanying it, *The Image of Christ*, are extraordinary affirmations of how art does resemble nature and of how, as Boris Pasternak declared, it “always meditates on death and thus always creates life. All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John.”²

Written by Gabriele Finaldi, Curator of the Gallery’s Later Italian and Spanish Painting, Susanna Avery-Quash, Xavier Bray, and Alexander Sturgis, Assistant Curators, Erika Langmuir, O.B.E., formerly Head of Education at the Gallery, and Neil MacGregor, its Director, *The Image of Christ* contains exquisite reproductions of almost two-hundred masterpieces of spiritual art drawn from the Judaeo-Christian perspective. Yet, paradoxically, precisely because of the reli-

gious inspiration of the artists, their creations transcend sectarian frames of reference. Still, as Neil MacGregor confirms in his discerning Introduction:

All great collections of European painting are inevitably also great collections of Christian art. In the National Gallery, London, roughly one third of the pictures—and many of the finest—are of Christian subjects. This is hardly surprising, for after classical antiquity, Christianity has been the predominant force shaping European culture. It is central to the story of European painting, preoccupying artists from Duccio to Dalí, inspiring some of the supreme masterpieces of all time.

“The aim of this exhibition and book,” MacGregor emphasizes, “is to focus attention on the purpose for which the works of art were made, and to explore what they might have meant to their original viewers.” That is accomplished in the book in illuminating chapters on “Sign and Symbol,” “The Dual Nature,” “The True Likeness,” “Passion and Compassion,” “Praying the Passion,” “The Saving Body,” and “The Abiding Presence,” in which great works of religious art are enhanced by eloquent commentaries on them, revealing how writers can handle language as deftly as did Ravel the English horn, flutes, oboes, trumpets, traditional string choir, bassoons, harps, trombones, and other instruments with which he transformed Moussorgsky’s piano suite.

Radiantly, *The Image of Christ*, from the very first chapter, illuminates a “biblical metaphor which largely eluded early Christian artists: Christ as the Light of the World (Luke 2:32; John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35). They hinted at it,” Erika Langmuir continues, “they identified Christ with pagan sun gods; they pictured him with a golden halo, or clothed in the radiance and glitter of gold mosaic. But not until the fifteenth century did artists have the technical means—oil paint—of making the dark visible. And you can’t picture

light until you can show it dispelling darkness.” But, once artists were able to depict light, paintings like *The Nativity at Night* (late fifteenth century) by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (about 1455/65; died about 1485/95) began to emerge. As Susanna Avery-Quash points out:

In this painting of the Nativity, the Netherlandish artist, Geertgen, draws on the imagery of Christ as light or *the* Light. Saint John says of Christ that he is “the true Light, which lighteth every man” (John 1:9) and the artist has centered the composition on the tiny figure of the Christ child from whom radiance emanates. The light dispels the immediate darkness to illuminate the sides of the stony crib, the hands and faces of the awestruck angels, and the sweet-sad, wondering countenance of his mother. Christ’s divine light outshines all other sources of illumination in the picture....

“We have put some of the Gallery’s religious pictures in a new context, not—as in other exhibitions—beside works by the same artist or from the same period,” MacGregor notes. “A new neighbour for a painting allows us to have a different dialogue with it, and that usually leads to the discovery of a picture even richer and more complex than the one we thought we already knew.” Wisely, the Gallery has also allowed some of the paintings to remain in their old neighborhoods. Thus a number of companion pieces by the same painter retain the connections between them that the artist intended, as is evident in Xavier Bray’s discussion of *The Madonna of the Meadow* (about 1500) by Giovanni Bellini (active around 1459; died 1516), in which “rather than depicting the infant Jesus awake in the Virgin’s arms, Bellini shows him lying fast asleep on his mother’s lap. He appears to be slumbering, comfortably, but there are darker undertones in the painting.... Bellini’s lyrical *Pietà* in the Accademia in Venice (fig. 18), which shows the fully-grown Christ lying dead

across the aged Virgin’s lap in a similar landscape, is the ideal companion piece and the poetic sequel to the *Madonna of the Meadow*.”

As one turns the breathtakingly beautiful pages of this book, one encounters the achievements of some of the world’s greatest artists like Breugel the Elder, Correggio, Dalí, Dürer, El Greco, Raphael, Rembrandt, or Velázquez, and saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, or Veronica. And one hears, too, the refrains of the “Promenade” in Ravel’s orchestration of Moussorgsky’s suite and the theme of the death of a genius so young underscored in it.

In *Saint Francis Embracing the Crucified Christ* (about 1620), by Francisco Ribalta (1565-1628), some of the brush strokes, as Gabriele Finaldi observes, are “almost repellent to modern eyes,” as when the saint “embraces the crucified Christ with tenderness, bringing his lips to the wound in Christ’s side in order to drink the blood which issues from it.” Conversely, as Finaldi also points out, a sculpture like *Christ on the Cold Stone* (about 1500), by an unknown sculptor, possibly from the Netherlands, is a more abstract, psychological study, depicting a withdrawn Saviour, deep in thought, sitting on a stone like “disconsolate Job on the ash heap lamenting his cruel fate.” Describing this sculpture, Emile Mâle, “the French art historian who in the 1920s drew attention to the importance and innovatory character of ... ‘Christ on the Cold Stone,’ wrote that ‘the seated Christ summarizes the entire Passion; he has exhausted the violence, the ignominy, the bestiality of man.... Here is the abyss of suffering, and the extreme limit of art.’”

After viewing *Christ Presented to the People* (about 1525-1530) by Correggio (about 1494; died 1534), *The Procession to Calvary* (probably about 1505) by Ridolfo Ghirlandaio (1483-1561), the *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* (1455-1460)

by Donatello (1386/87-1466), and so many other masterpieces expressive of the flowering of the arts during the Renaissance, the era most represented in the book, one suddenly sees, within the *Icon of the Mandylion of Edessa* (eighteenth century), “Ananias [who] is unable to draw Jesus.” The poignancy of this little figure may have been felt by Albert, Prince Consort, who purchased the icon in 1851 as part of the Oettingen-Wallerstein Collection.

The reader pauses for a moment, as did Moussorgsky when a painting by Hartmann fascinated him. All ten scenes around the border of the icon, at the center of which is a stunning impression of the face of Christ, “are accompanied by a Greek inscription, and have as their source the *Story of the Image of Edessa*”—a miraculous likeness of Jesus “not made by human hands,” also known as “the Mandylion.” In the icon’s second panel the Saviour is standing off to the right of a barefoot servant who is sitting on the ground, clutching a tablet on which he is trying desperately to draw the image of Christ.

Ananias, according to the legend retold here by Alexander Sturgis, is the servant of Abgar, King of Edessa (modern Urfa, near the Syrian border of Turkey). Afflicted with leprosy and arthritis, the distraught ruler has given him a letter to place in the hands of Jesus, begging Him to visit their country. Failing in that, the servant must paint an accurate portrait of the Saviour and carry it back to Abgar. But, when he finally arrives in Judea, Ananias is unable to deliver his communiqué or to draw a likeness of Christ. Seeing his distress, Jesus calls him over, learns the nature of his mission, and gives him a letter declining Abgar’s invitation but promising that the king will be cured. The Saviour then washes His own face with water, wipes off the moisture clinging to the towel, “and in some divine and inexpressible

manner had his own likeness impressed on it.’ Ananias returned with both image and letter to Abgar who was cured and converted.”

As one thinks of how Ananias, in all his humility, obtained a truer likeness of Christ than did the greatest artists of all the centuries, one is again struck by how often this book inspires “those thoughts,” as John Milton expressed it, “that wander through eternity.” But, as Moussorgsky discovered as he departed, exhausted, from the gallery in Saint Petersburg, one must at some point leave pictures at an exhibition if only to be able to return to them again and to that selfsame beauty first encountered on the cover of the book, with its striking reproduction of the *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951) by Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), described by Sturgis as “perhaps the most celebrated and reproduced religious painting made in the twentieth century,” wherein the “monumental figure of the crucified Christ hovers above the world...yet he is distant, above the clouds, his face hidden.” Dalí’s controversial masterpiece has always provoked strong reactions: “For Saint John, the crucified Christ was primarily a focus for compassion, a tortured and murdered man, but Dalí aimed instead at an image of perfection and transcendence.” Thus Dalí himself has said, “My principal preoccupation was that my Christ would be as beautiful as the God that he is.”

As Dalí’s painting reveals, man’s murder of the Son of God in “a place called Golgotha” can, in art, coalesce with beauty in such a way as to transcend, by embracing aesthetically, what occurred outside the wall of Jerusalem in those long hours before “the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent” (Matthew XXVII:51). That intersection of beauty with the Cross—that dimension of it that becomes the beauty of holiness—stuns the viewer’s

soul, silencing it from crying “out of the depths,” as did Moussorgsky to Vladimir Stasov, the great art and music critic who had introduced him to Hartmann: “My dear friend, what a terrible blow! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life—and creatures like Hartmann must die! ... There again—what a fool I am! Why be angry when you cannot change anything! Enough then—the rest is silence!”

1. Michael Polanyi, “What is a Painting?,” *Society, Economics & Philosophy: Selected Papers*, edited with an Introduction by R. T. Allen (New Brunswick, N.J., c1997), 350. 2. *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York, 1958), 90.

Thomas More: Man of Principle

CHRISTOPHER J. BEITING

The Life of Thomas More, by Peter Ackroyd, *New York: Anchor, 1999. x + 447 pp.*

Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage, by Gerard Wegemer, *Princeton: Scepter, 1999. ix + 307 pp.*

Thomas More on Statesmanship, by Gerard Wegemer, *Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998. viii + 262 pp.*

ANY DEPICTION OF Thomas More is fraught with difficulties. The Renaissance prized paradox and ambiguity, and More was no exception to the trends of his age. The famous Holbein portrait of More shows him arrayed in court finery, yet beneath

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it he is wearing a hair shirt. Biographers of More have had to struggle with his seeming contradictions and have tended to fall into two extremes. Some, like More’s first biographer, his son-in-law William Roper, have stressed the hagiographical at the expense of the real. More recent biographies, such as those by Richard Marius (1984) and Alistair Fox (1983), have stressed the psycho-historical and sexual at the expense of the sacred. However, we are now well placed to benefit from two important scholarly developments: the completion of Yale University’s critical edition of Thomas More’s complete works and the publication of new historical studies on the Reformation era. Peter Ackroyd and Gerard Wegemer both make good use of these resources. They let More speak in his own words, and thereby provide the reader with new insights into More for the twenty-first century.

Of the two biographies, Ackroyd’s *The Life of Thomas More* has received the greater attention, and it is by far the more literary work. Much of this is perhaps due to the fact that Ackroyd is a prizewinning novelist, and a biographer who writes with a novelist’s sense for narrative. Ackroyd is also a consummate Londoner, whose works often center on London and Londoners of different eras. Thus, it is no surprise that his recreations of sixteenth-century London are the best part of the book. He makes the reader experience the sensual vividness of the city and daily life within it. To a new historicist’s “thick reproduction” of an era he adds a novelist’s skill, and for the reader the end result is as sumptuous as the Holbein portrait that graces its cover. Particularly well depicted are all the religious trappings of pre-Reformation Catholic England, with many expressions of a vigorous and thriving lay piety, and in this respect the book can be seen as a counterpart to Eamon Duffy’s recent *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992). Indeed, it is