

INTRODUCTION

Titles often either understate or overstate the contents of books. In the present instance the title does both. 'Byzantine Art in the Making' is an appropriate designation for the central process within the period of art history to which this study is devoted. My actual subject is both larger and narrower.

The book is concerned with art in the Mediterranean world from the third through the seventh century. Roman art was still in its fullness in the third century; Constantine's new capital on the site of ancient Byzantium had not yet been founded; and although the city of Constantinople ultimately assumed undisputed leadership in the arts, this was a slow and gradual process. Even in the fifth and sixth centuries we shall encounter many important monuments that cannot properly be called Byzantine.

In this sense the scope of the book is broader than its title implies. On the other hand my coverage will not be comprehensive. It will extend only to the pictorial arts and will not include architecture. I shall be dealing, as the subtitle indicates, with stylistic developments only. And finally, in illustrating these developments, my procedure will be selective. It will be my purpose to trace, on the basis of a representative series of monuments, the main lines in the evolution of artistic forms during a particularly critical and complex period in the history of Western art.

The period is often referred to as Early Christian. This term, however, has connotations of the catacombs, of hesitant, tentative, perhaps even furtive beginnings. I find it inappropriate for works such as the mosaics of S. Vitale in Ravenna or the great encaustic icons of Mount Sinai. Although architecture is outside the scope of this book, in that field the suitability of the term for our period as a whole is even more uncertain. A building such as Justinian's church of St Sophia is not Early Christian.

Nor can monuments such as these properly be termed late antique. There has been a tendency to extend the concept of *Spätantike* to include not only the last centuries of Roman art but also succeeding developments at least to the period of Justinian if not, indeed, to the seventh or eighth century.¹ Admittedly this usage has its advantages. It puts proper emphasis on the continued strength of the Graeco-Roman tradition. But it overemphasizes the past at the expense of the future. Again, S. Vitale and St Sophia are not late antique.

There is, in fact, no simple term which adequately covers the entire period with which we are concerned, and it is obvious that in this problem of nomenclature there lies concealed a problem of identity. The period does not have the same kind of clear profile as other major phases in the history of Western art.² We cannot readily associate with it – as we can, for example, with Gothic or Baroque art – a distinctive set of forms in a distinctive combination. It is true that under close scrutiny any period in art history tends to lose some of its unity and cohesion. But we can still name many works of art that are quintessentially Gothic or quintessentially Baroque. For our period this is far more difficult. Nor is there a readily intelligible evolutionary curve in its artistic development. However differentiated the history of Gothic or Baroque art may have become, we can still speak with justice of Early, High and Late phases, of a style in the making, fully matured and finally in a state of hypertrophy foreshadowing its demise. No such life cycle can be discerned in the art of our period. Instead we are confronted with a coexistence or an abrupt and seemingly erratic succession of diverse and contrasting styles. Notorious cases of wide disagreement among scholars as to the dating of major monuments highlight this situation.

The period can be defined quite readily in terms of its boundaries. Historically, its beginning is marked by the first unmistakable signs of disintegration, the appearance of the first serious cracks in the structure of the Roman empire as a universal power; its end by the emergence of two great new powers with which the successors of Augustus and Constantine henceforth had to share possession of what had been the ancient world. With the Arab domains established on its southern flank and a Germanic empire in process of formation to the North, by the eighth century the old empire was finally and irrevocably reduced to regional status. Our time span is similarly set off in terms of art history. The third century witnessed the first crisis, the first major step in the disintegration of the classical tradition; the eighth century, the emergence of Islamic and North European art as separate entities and, simultaneously, the outbreak of the Iconoclastic Controversy which produced a major hiatus, at any rate for religious art, within the Byzantine empire itself. By then, however, firm foundations had already been laid for medieval art both in the East and in the West. To a very great extent Byzantine art of the post-Iconoclastic period resumed and built upon the traditions established before that great crisis; and the nascent art of the medieval West, while dependent on the contribution of the northern countries and the aesthetics of their 'barbarian' past, likewise drew heavily on these traditions.

In a very real sense, therefore, our period is one of transition – a bridge

between Antiquity and the Middle Ages – and therein, one might say, lies its true identity. ‘Pre-medieval’, in fact, might be a suitable term with which to encompass it.³ Yet there is something intrinsically awkward about labelling five hundred years in the history of Western art simply as transitional. For the great monuments of the period – again I cite St Sophia and S.Vitale – it is hardly an adequate classification. And even if the term were applied to artistic achievements of such magnitude, what exactly is their place within this transition? There was, as I have indicated, no simple progression from a starting point to a goal.

In one sense – and it is an important one – the centuries which concern us do offer a rather clear picture of an organic development. I refer to the emergence and first full elaboration of art with a Christian content. An extraordinary process of growth lies between two definite, if negatively complexed, landmarks – the taboo against religious images which obtained in the early Church until about A.D.200, and the new ban on such images in eighth-century Byzantium. From modest beginnings there arose a pictorial art of increasingly diverse content and scope and of ever more central and vital importance in public and private life. The very weightiness and centrality this imagery attained was what finally provoked the Iconoclastic reaction. Unquestionably this is a major aspect of Mediterranean art from the third to the eighth century. Indeed, in this sense the term Early Christian could well be applied to the period as a whole – provided that term were taken to denote not just a groping start but a fully rounded achievement. The process, though not our principal subject, will have a bearing on our discussion at many points.

But in matters of form and style, too, the period as a whole does have an internal development of its own. There is an intrinsic pattern, though it does not take the form either of a simple one-way progression from one style to another or of a life cycle of a single style through successive phases. To elucidate this pattern – a pursuit which is surely relevant to the problem of the period’s unity and separate identity – will be the purpose of this book.

There was a time, earlier in this century, when scholars tried to establish an art-historical framework for our period in essentially geographic terms. The coexistence of different regional ‘schools’ with different artistic traditions and the interaction of these ‘schools’ were thought to go far in explaining the apparent lack of cohesion and unity in the overall picture. Charles Rufus Morey’s antithesis of an ‘Alexandrian’ and an ‘Asiatic’ style is perhaps the best-known example of this approach.⁴ Early in my own work, when sketching an art-historical synthesis of this period, I also made extensive use of the concept of regional styles as a means of correlating a mass of seemingly disjointed stylistic

phenomena.⁵ The regional factor is undoubtedly important, and I do not intend to ignore it. To have done so is one of several basic points to be held against the one scholar who in the last twenty or thirty years has made a serious attempt to give a coherent account in stylistic terms of the history of art from the fourth to the seventh century. In an exceedingly audacious essay Andreas Rumpf has forced upon the disparate material a highly schematic pattern that does not allow for the variety of factors involved.⁶ I do not think it is possible to isolate stylistic features – in the rendering of the human figure, for instance – that characterize works of a given date regardless of where they originated and regardless also of their subject matter and of the purpose for which they were made. Style changes occur at particular times, in particular places or regions and often in particular contexts which can sometimes be fairly narrowly circumscribed. Many of these impulses do, however, fall into broader patterns so that, over a longer period, one can speak of dominant stylistic trends. Over the years I have come to recognize more and more the existence and importance of such trends which follow one another in time and whose sequence and interaction constitute an intelligible and meaningful process. It is this sequence of trends – something far looser and more flexible than Rumpf's *Stilphasen* – which I propose to illustrate.

The process as I see it is a dialectical one. At certain times and in certain places bold stabs were made in the direction of new, unclassical forms, only to be followed by reactions, retrospective movements and revivals. In some contexts such developments – in either direction – took place slowly, hesitantly and by steps so small as to be almost imperceptible. In addition there were extraordinary attempts at synthesis, at reconciling conflicting aesthetic ideals. Out of this complex dialectic, medieval form emerged. My purpose will be to define the dominant trends as they succeeded one another. And, up to a point, I shall try to make sense of them in broader historical terms.

In some future analysis of twentieth-century intellectual history a footnote might well be devoted to a minor paradox. Many of the most significant advances made in the middle decades of this century in art-historical research – and this applies to all of its fields, but to late antique, Early Christian and Byzantine art more particularly – have been through iconographic and iconological approaches. That is to say, scholars have focused intensively and most fruitfully on the subject content of works of art, on the rationale behind the choice and grouping of themes and on their use in a given context or in relation to a particular patron, purpose or function. Yet this development in scholarship has coincided with a period of the most radical formalism in art itself. Art historians were concentrating on content and messages at a time when

painters and sculptors were eliminating subject matter altogether. I mention this rather odd disjunction merely to point out that no period more than our own has proclaimed in its art the meaningfulness of visual form as such. In our universities students flock to courses in which modern non-objective art is discussed and interpreted. Evidently they believe that it can tell them something about the period in which they live.

There is a general proposition involved here – namely, that the formal aspects of works of art hold important clues to an understanding of the period which produced them. This proposition I plan to take seriously. The concept of a stylistic trend with which I shall operate itself implies that a given set of forms becomes significant from a historical point of view. A form which ‘catches on’, as distinct from a purely ephemeral or accidental departure from an established norm, is liable to be meaningful to a group, a movement, an entire age. The difficulty lies in determining why.

There is, of course, an interrelationship between form and content. By stressing the importance of form *qua* form I do not imply any kind of dichotomy in this respect. In an attempt to interpret stylistic phenomena in historical terms, every aspect of a work of art must be taken into account: subject matter and the message it carries; the functional context; the patron’s interest and intent; the use of established prototypes and formulae and their possible connotations. Sometimes there is a very definite and obvious relationship between one or another of these factors and the artistic form. At other times such interconnections are more indirect, subtle and elusive. But there are also instances where none of these approaches yields a satisfactory interpretation, and then one must have recourse to other kinds of data not provided by or gleaned from the work of art itself but from the social, intellectual or religious history of the period. And finally, there are cases where leads are lacking altogether and where the art historian can interpret style only intuitively or else must abandon the pursuit. No attempt will be made in this study to provide interpretations at all costs.

I have previously referred to the rise of Christian imagery and to the central role of that process within our period. The interpretative clues I have just mentioned will in many instances come from this sector. It is not feasible, however, to encompass the subject in all its fullness and complexity in the present framework. The early history of Christian imagery has its own dynamics.⁷ We must be content to glimpse it at those points where it is clearly of significance for the process of stylistic development which is our concern. We shall see that in the first phase the Christian contribution was negligible. The history of the first great crisis in Roman art in the third century can be written

practically without reference to Christian works. Thus in my first chapter Christian monuments will figure only briefly and mainly on account of their bearing on what was to come later. Early in the reign of Constantine, however, at the time when Christianity gained official recognition, we shall encounter Christian works of art with distinctive formal characteristics, unprecedented and unparalleled in pagan art and apparently bound up with their religious content and function. We shall see that the increase in Christian patronage and the expansion and diversification of Christian subject matter which began with Constantine certainly had a bearing on stylistic developments, although all through the fourth century much of the initiative in matters of style still came from other sectors. It was in the fifth century that art which was Christian both in content and in functional purpose assumed undisputed leadership. To a correspondingly larger degree this content and these purposes will thereafter prove to be relevant to our understanding and interpretation of specifically artistic achievements.

It will be clear from these introductory remarks that this study is not a handbook or in any sense a work of reference. Even within the limits implicit in its particular approach no attempt will be made to cover uniformly the entire artistic patrimony of the centuries concerned – fragmentary as that patrimony is in any case. Certain places and certain media will receive more attention than others. Illuminated manuscripts, for instance, will figure very little. While reflecting the same basic trends as work in other media, they often pose special problems for the stylistically oriented art historian, problems which are rooted in the conditions of their manufacture and to which it would be difficult to do justice in a book covering a large time span in a restricted space. In general the text will be sparing both on descriptions and on the discussion of controversial questions of chronology, although the literature cited in the notes will enable the reader to inform himself on these matters. My aim is to trace a broad picture of stylistic developments with the help of selected monuments, and the selection will, I trust, prove to be sufficiently representative to give that picture validity and meaning.