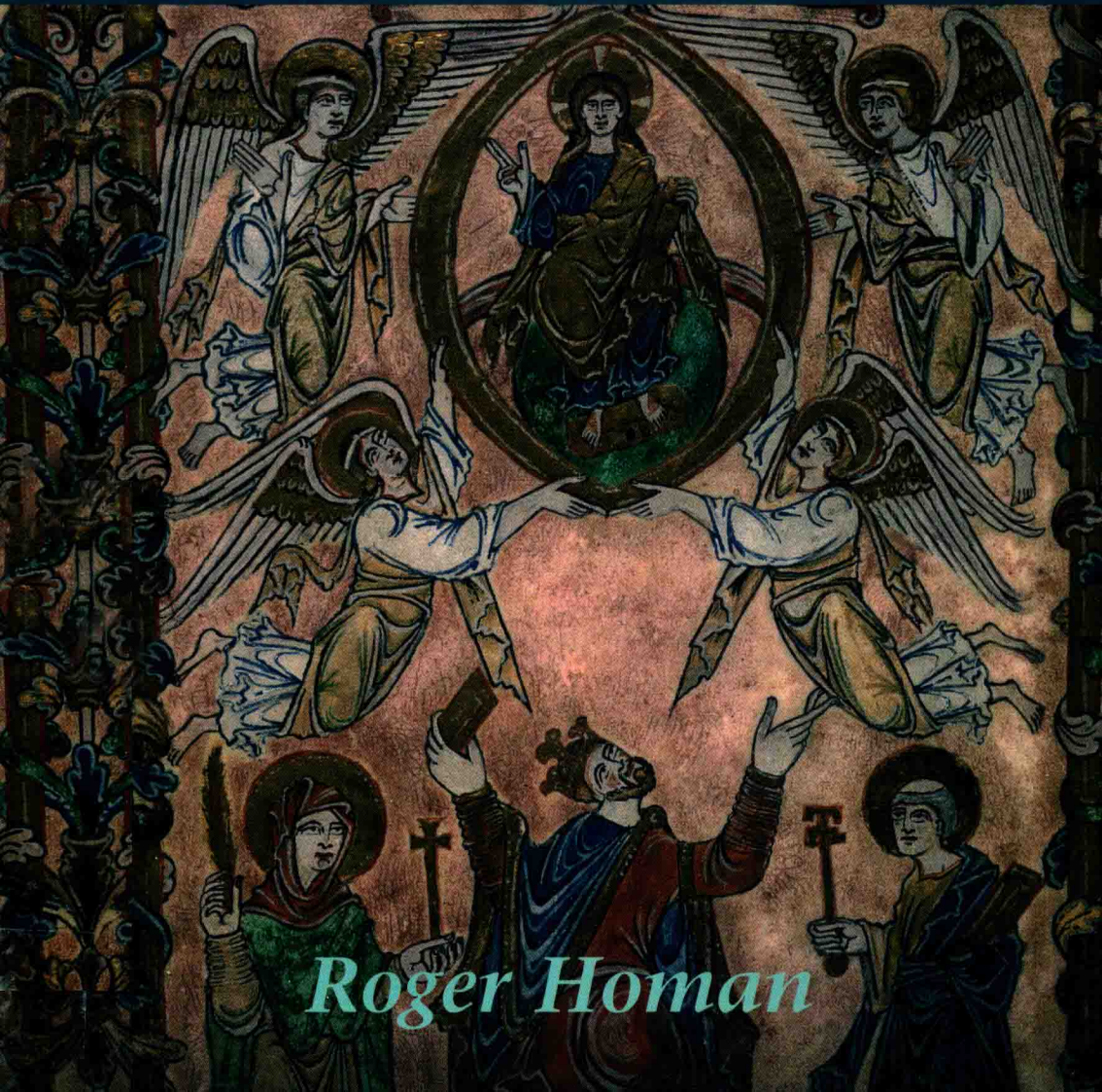


The Art of the Sublime

Principles of Christian Art and Architecture



Roger Homan

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ASHGATE —

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THE ART OF THE SUBLIME

List of Illustrations

- 1 Sompting church, Sussex
- 2 King Edgar offers up the New Minster Charter
- 3 Old South Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts
- 4 Come-to-Good, near Truro, Cornwall, Quaker meeting house
- 5 Rievaulx Abbey, Yorkshire
- 6 Master of the Legend of St Catherine, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*
- 7 Eric Gill, *Eve*
- 8 *The Madonna of Compassion*, 295 × 365 mm, Private collection
- 9 St Paul's Cathedral, London, 1675–1711
- 10 John Everett Millais, *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop*
- 11 William Butterfield's St Alban, Holborn
- 12 Beresford Hope's grave, Kilndown
- 13 The chapel of Lancing College, Sussex
- 14 'God bless my dear father, and bring him safely home'

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	VII
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	IX
1 Introduction	1
Finding favour	1
Adam and Eve	4
Art as spiritual expression	7
Method	10
2 The Beautiful and the Holy	15
Beauty and the realm of the holy	15
Religious language	18
The trappings of sacred space	25
3 The Fear of God	31
Byzantine	31
The Celtic spirit	35
Anglo-Saxon	38
The art of the book	41
Romanesque	42
Monastic deviations	45
4 Gothic	49
The meaning of Gothic	49
Gothic architecture	52
The spirit of Gothic art	55
Stained glass	63
The demise of Gothic	68
The aftermath: baroque	72

5	Puritan Aesthetics	77
	Introduction	77
	Righteous destruction	78
	Principles of Protestant architecture	81
	Friends' meeting houses	88
	Shaker	95
	Joseph Southall: Quaker artist	99
	Conclusion	107
6	Spirit and Conscience	109
	The revival of Gothic	109
	The tension of pagan and Gothic	118
	The spirituality of the Pre-Raphaelites	120
	William Morris	125
	The beauty of holiness	128
7	Morality and Christian Art	135
	Introduction	135
	The cult of the artist	135
	The morality of the artist	136
	Icons	142
	Pugin and Ruskin	147
	Galleries	152
	The destiny of pictured prayer	156
	The justification of expense	159
8	Conclusion	163
	The judgement of sacred art	163
	'Dishonest saccharine prettiness'?: in defence of the low brow	165
	A few precepts	169
	Toward a Christian aesthetic	172
	<i>Bibliography</i>	175
	<i>Glossary</i>	185
	<i>Works of art cited</i>	191
	<i>Buildings and artefacts of interest</i>	199
	<i>Index</i>	205

Introduction

Finding favour

The first aim of Art is not to procure pleasure through beauty any more than the first aim of Religion is to procure a comfortable belief for the soul.

Henry Wilson, 1899

The devotees of the concert ... have no use for music – they only want to enjoy it.

Eric Gill, 1937

Pleasure in visual forms, like pleasure in music and food and various fragrances, is mediated by a number of considerations. Not everybody enjoys the smell of paraffin or body liniment, but the author of this book remembers them from childhood visits to his grandmother and they evoke for him a special kind of homeliness. Associations with previous experiences are powerful factors in determining what we reject and what we choose.

Our learning further affects our dispositions. I may admire a finely carved piece of ivory, recognizing the patience and skill involved in the craft and responding favourably to the visual effect. But when I take into account that the ivory trade is responsible for the near extinction of the elephant, I may wish to withhold or reverse my appreciation. I may recognize *pâté de foie gras* to be a great delicacy and could enjoy it were it not for information lodged with me about the cruel method of force-feeding geese. Conversely, those who have been favourably disposed to Russia in its current or former dispensation, whether for its language and culture or for its politics, may well have kept more vodka in the house than those who preferred Ibiza. What is happening here is that moral considerations and allegiances are affecting the preferences and tastes that we allow ourselves to express; further, we may be controlling and cultivating our tastes in accordance with our principles.

Yet again, pleasure and appreciation may be premised on certain formal considerations. We may appreciate an item not for its immediate impact but

for the labour that has been devoted to its production. If one's hostess declares that the dessert has been hand-stirred over a low heat for three hours, one is disinclined to sing the praises of a plain banana. Other measurable factors are influential in what people do and do not like. The market value of an image, its antiquity and the mystique that has been created around it (as in the case of the *Mona Lisa*) engender a sense of public awe and wonder, attract crowds to exhibitions and even dictate what they should appreciate. In all these respects, of course, the same is true of a bottle of claret. In these ways, a dominant mode of appreciation orchestrated by notional experts bears down upon the individual in the same way as a fashion or trend.

We have not hitherto used the term 'art'. To define something as art invites a number of expectations, standards, criteria for evaluation and methods of study that are not appropriate in the religious context. Many of the images featured in this book were produced for devotional purposes and as pictured prayers. Notably, the frescoes that Fra Angelico painted on the walls of cells in the convent of San Marco in Florence were not intended to be visited by crowds of tourists. We have it from the sixteenth-century historian Giorgio Vasari that the humble monk fasted before he took up his brushes and that tears rolled down his cheeks when he painted the Crucifixion. This is a far cry from patronage by the aristocracy, the habit of art collecting, the methods of art history, the study of the developments in techniques, the classification of schools and movements and the use of advanced technology to verify dates and sources. The art connoisseur comes to Fra Angelico's cell as an alien. If the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Jan van Eyck were to stir in his grave and find us studying the growth rings of the timber frames on which his works are mounted instead of the images on the front, he might well think we had missed the point. He would, however, find some sympathy for his position in the thesis of this book, in which sacred art is appreciated first as sacred and then, if necessary, as art. The principle of Christian aesthetics that is inherent throughout the text is a moral one: it has to do with the theological beliefs and devotional attitudes of the painter, sculptor or architect and of the intended receiver. Whether we are looking at medieval or Revived Gothic or at the visual effects of Puritan traditions, the persistent principles are truth and integrity. We are here rather less interested in virtuosity and sophistication.

Such a position prompts a number of critical questions. We claim for Gothic a cluster of moral and spiritual values; but what of the visual traditions that run counter to these? In this respect, a critical view is taken of baroque architecture for its conceit, as we shall endeavour to demonstrate, and shameless ostentation. And what of those who produce images for devotional use but who do not believe or behave in a compatible way? What of the

licentious monk Fra Filippo Lippi or of the thug Caravaggio or of the incestuous Eric Gill, all of whom made significant contributions to Christian art? Such stories as theirs are raised in the chapter entitled 'Morality and Christian Art' (Chapter 7).

Yet again, what of 'bad taste' in religious art? There is plenty of it about, especially in places of pilgrimage, but the judgement of it is not a straightforward matter. A plastic Madonna with a halo of flashing lights is as yet unlikely to find its way into a glass case of the Metropolitan Museum in New York or the Louvre in Paris. It will not meet the standards of those who pick and choose objects for public exhibition. Nor, indeed, will it necessarily pass the tests of integrity, honesty and the motive of production that are to be affirmed in this book. However, it may deserve honour in serving a devotional purpose for the one who parts with a few cents and takes it home.

The major components of the book relate to traditions of visual representation within specific historical periods. The tracking of movements and developments, however, is not our purpose. The chapter on 'Early Expressions' (Chapter 3) treats of the sacred art of Byzantium, of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon traditions and of the period and style called Romanesque or, in England, Norman. The chapter on 'Gothic' (Chapter 4) has to do with the devotional art and architecture of the medieval period that were to be revived in the nineteenth century. The chapter on 'Puritan Aesthetics' (Chapter 5) is an appreciation of the visual traditions of a number of post-Reformation churches and movements. And the chapter 'Spirit and Conscience' (Chapter 6) is given to significant currents in religion in the nineteenth century, including the influential and conscientious perspectives of William Morris and John Ruskin. This represents a chronological sequence, but the book is by no means historical in its perspective. Each chapter is an application of the religious aesthetic adumbrated in these opening pages. In the examination of early expressions, we observe the didactic power of visual forms in what were in some cases pre-literate communities. In a retrospective reading of the spirituality of the medieval period prompted by the insights of Pugin, Gothic is explored for its consuming piety and for its affirmation of all that is truly Christian against the pagan and secular. Puritan principles of visual expression are conveyed either by means of an explicit code of taboos (as in the case of Quakers) or by the cultivation of simplicity as a way of inner being (as in the case of Shakers). In Chapter 6 we touch a number of deep moral issues that affected the relation of religion and art in the nineteenth century, including the dignity of the artist or craft-worker and the detachment of some practitioners from academic notions of art and from its commercialization.

It will be seen already that there is a tension of perspectives that corresponds to a conflict of interest. On the one hand, the faithful bring to their visual

culture sets of beliefs and needs. On the other, these expressions are judged and valued by experts operating technical and academic principles. This book is about the dynamic relationship of the two perspectives and of the individuals who adopt them.

Adam and Eve

Cranach's *Adam and Eve* is a painting of two naked persons, but not of nudes. Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) is not interested here in studying the anatomy of the human body, as were some contemporary painters of the Italian Renaissance such as Michelangelo. The diptych captures two dispositions with appropriate symbols. In the left panel Adam holds his fig-leaf strategically and the apple innocently: by all appearances he is bewildered and has no clear intentions regarding what to do with the apple. Eve, by contrast, has clearer ideas: she adopts an alluring pose and holds the apple as she holds herself, to tempt and to tease. Adam is unmoved, either by the apple Eve is holding or by her charm. It has been customary down the ages to blame the serpent for what happened next. But Cranach's serpent features less prominently than the stag behind Eve, which has a potent symbolic meaning in the physical liaison. Eve's intention to eat the apple is deliberate and defiant. Even before it is eaten, the apple is less an object of temptation than Eve herself. In the medieval manner Cranach uses the narrative symbols of fig-leaf, apple, serpent and stag to convey the message, but the dominant language of these images is body language. It is a study of the fragility of the human spirit, of the naïveté of a man who is about to fall, of weakness in response to environment.

A clear contrast is provided by Dürer's representation of the same subject in a woodcut of 1504. Dürer's portrayal is densely textual: it has to be 'read'. For those who were or are literate in visual symbolism, the vocabulary is clear. For example, the four medieval tempers are represented by animals: choleric by the cat, sanguine by the rabbit, melancholic by the elk and phlegmatic by the ox. This vocabulary was much used and well understood in medieval church decoration as well as in painting. In more recent times it has been made accessible to the student through the work of Emile Mâle (1913) and is explored in the course of a discussion on Gothic in Chapter 4.

While the vocabulary of Dürer's *Adam and Eve* draws directly from the theological tradition of the medieval world, his execution draws from the work of some of his contemporaries in Italy. Dürer would have liked to be a painter, but a more prosperous lifestyle was achievable by being a print-maker. Consequently he became more practised with his pencil than with his brush. We know from surviving works (*Nude Girl*, 1493; *Apollo and Diana*, 1501–3) that before the 1504 print he studied and calculated exactly the

proportions of the human form. What we have in his *Adam and Eve* has been achieved mathematically, but we have lost the identity of body and spirit that distinguishes the painting by Cranach. We are left to understand the human condition of Adam and Eve by reading the signs around them. We may be enabled in an intellectual way to understand that condition, but Dürer does not enable us to connect with it empathically in the way that Cranach does.

With Eric Gill we turn to an English artist of the early twentieth century. If we are inclined to call his *Eve* erotic, we would only be recognizing the sensation that he enjoyed in the execution of much of his drawing and sculpture, even of representations of the Mother/Madonna and Child: in his autobiography he declared:

My first erotic drawing was not on the back of an envelope but a week or so's work on a decent piece of hard stone ... Lord, how exciting! – and not merely seeing and touching but actually making her. I was responsible for her very existence and her every form came straight out of my heart ... A new world opened up before me ... A new alphabet – the word was made flesh. (Hove Museum 1991: 15)

In the image of Eve it is not merely the position and intention of the serpent that might worry us but Gill's evident pleasure in the drawing of her thigh. We have to ask whether a thing is sacred art merely because it has a religious subject. It is a question that we must take seriously when we discover that Gill was a deeply religious man, a convert to the Roman Catholic Church, who built himself a chapel for daily offices and was a tertiary or lay member of the Dominican order. But with his Catholic faith he was able to synthesize elements of Hindu philosophy to which he came in 1907 through contact with Ananda Coomaraswamy. Gill was compelled by the understanding that fleshly and spiritual natures were not opposites or conditions in conflict, but passages on a single continuum. Gill's provocative figures were made in the full consciousness that between 'simple people and God there is no barrier of pride [because] the things of humanity [are] analogous to the things of God' (Hove Museum 1991: 21). So Gill's aesthetic, bewildering though it was to his critics, was rooted in clearly developed moral and theological principles. Such principles were convincing to the Quaker commentator Kenneth Barnes. The Quaker notion of integrity which informs Barnes's assessment has to do with being true to oneself as well as to one's fellows: early Quakers wanted to 'get rid of frivolity and pretence, establish sincerity, honesty, trustworthiness and plain unambiguous speech' (Barnes 1984: 7). Integrity in art is a matter of reaching into one's deepest being and conveying it honestly. Gill stands up to tests of these kinds. It is granted that his sexual energy was abnormal, but through extramarital engagements, Barnes is satisfied that Gill remained devoted to his wife. Gill's drawings of the female nude, of which that of Eve is typical, were collected in his *Drawings*

from *Life* published in 1940: they may have been natural but they were also unconventionally explicit: 'They were, however, wholly innocent and in the preface there was an unsurpassed expression of the goodness and joyfulness of our sexual experience. The feeling he conveyed was of respect and above all of tenderness' (Barnes 1984: 10).

In Gill's writings, religious, aesthetic and sexual experience are regarded on the same plane. Even letter-cutting is a sensual experience said by Gill to be 'not for eunuchs'. Of his erstwhile master Edward Johnston he writes:

The first time I saw him writing, and saw the writing that came as he wrote, I had that thrill and tremble of the heart which otherwise I can only remember having had when first I touched her body or saw her hair down for the first time, (Lord! what the young men have lost since women bobbed their hair!), or when I first heard the plain-chant of the Church (as they sang it at Louvain in the Abbey of Mont César), or when I first entered the church of San Clemente in Rome or first saw the North Transept of Chartres from the little alley between the houses (Gill 1940a: 119).

So for Eric Gill's freedom from inhibition, for his apparent reverence for human sexuality, for the coherence of his philosophy and his practice, for the honesty to admit his own tendencies, Barnes has him as a man of 'outstanding integrity': 'We can think of Eric Gill', Barnes concluded, 'as a man of wholesome normality' (1984: 15). Five years later, however, Fiona McCarthy's biography was to introduce previously unknown details of Gill's private life and put a different complexion on his religious art: the complexities of Gill and the value of his work will be explored in Chapter 7.

These images of Adam and Eve introduce one or two of the themes with which this book is occupied. Cranach's interpretation demonstrates the potential of art to connect with the human spirit, with the persistent experience of temptation and with human frailty and unease. While the artist may be true to the spirit, however, it may be untrue to the text: the vocabulary of symbol becomes a new literalism, displacing the old. The artist resolves as an apple a fruit that is not specified in the text (Genesis 2:11). And when we get to know the artist, we may become more uncomfortable about the image produced for devotional use. It may be that what Gill sometimes (but not always) acknowledged as his weakness stands in the way of our valuing the image he offers. On the other hand, he may be sharing his experience of temptation in a way that connects with our own: after all, these are days in which the serpent appeals more often through the prospect of sexual pleasure than in the irresistible desire to eat apples.

Art as spiritual expression

To define a religious image as a work of art is to regard the product rather more than the process. The works which are the focus of this book are described in diverse places by a variety of terms such as 'religious art', 'sacred art' and 'devotional art'. At a superficial level these terms are interchangeable, but they also convey significantly different perspectives which need to be stated.

Works of art which describe persons or historical events in a religious tradition may fairly be called 'religious art'. The term refers not to their quality or their purpose but to their subject matter. It may be confined to a narrative or didactic purpose or it may function in a symbolic way to make a religious connection, as on a Christmas card or gravestone. The inadequacy of the term 'religious art' in this book is its exclusiveness: that which lacks a religious theme does not belong to the category of religious art even though it may have an overwhelmingly spiritual purpose. This is true of the work of the Quaker artist Joseph Southall, whose most powerful spiritual works are sometimes developed from pagan themes (see Chapter 5, p. 61). Conversely, a religious text may be developed but not with a spiritual purpose. We may consider the representation of the Cross in Serrano's *Piss Light* an image that is easy on the eye but disturbing of the spirit once we come to realize that it is executed in the medium of urine, blood and milk; even if the artist is a practising Catholic (Milne 2001: 12), it is difficult to suppose that such a work is intended to be constructive of the kingdom of God.

The notion of the 'sacred' distinguishes that to which access is in some measure closed. It is a property of an object or space, and only by an appropriate preparation may individuals touch or enter that which is sacred. To describe as 'sacred art' all the images discussed in this book will therefore be seen as a preposterous or extreme claim. But it only surprises because the sense has been lost of where this art belongs and of the purposes for which it was produced. The argument is made in the closing chapter that Christian art was once sacred and that it was then desacralized by being plundered and hung in galleries; subsequently, artists have claimed a new sanctity for themselves and in the name of artistic freedom have wantonly desecrated the symbols of Christian faith.

The term 'devotional art' points to the original purpose of many works. A great number of the better-known medieval paintings of the Crucifixion and of the Madonna were commissioned as altarpieces. They were destined to have a central place in the collective worship of the faithful community. Such a place is the proper location of the icon in the Orthodox churches. Sherrard (1990) prefers to talk of 'liturgical art', and our only reason for not doing so here is that the associations of liturgy are normally with a prescribed

text and form shared by a congregation of the faithful; by talking of 'devotional art' we mean to include the images which are commissioned for private devotion such as the cell frescoes of Fra Angelico at San Marco in Florence. A little-known but distinctive example of devotional art hangs by the door as the visitor leaves the Frick Gallery in New York; it is a small painting by Barna da Siena that shows Christ bearing the Cross to Calvary followed by a diminutive monk. Doubtless it hung in the monk's cell and he was compelled daily to look upon it and ponder that he had not truly picked up and borne the burden of the Cross in his own life. It is an image calculated to torment the one who beholds it.

We now come to the interminable questions of what it is to be spiritual and what it means when, in the context of the Christian faith, we claim a work of art to have spiritual properties. For the purposes of this book we may propose a formula for an understanding of Christian spirituality. Spiritual expressions have to do, we may say, with a connection between the interior life of the individual and the remote ideals and unattainable states to which he or she may only aspire. In the tradition of Judaism and Christianity the metaphor for aspiration was provided on the second day of Creation, when God created a firmament or heaven which, until the twentieth century, could not be reached. The notion of righteousness which is the condition of fulfilment of what is required of the faithful has no place in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus's inclination in answer to the rich young ruler who has kept all the commandments from childhood is to move the goalposts and tell the man to give his fortune to the poor (Matthew 19:21). That there are moral conditions which are not attainable is central to the Christian view: Robert Browning catches this principle in his poem *Andrea del Sarto*:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

The notions of idealism and aspiration are evident in Christian art. The ethereal realm is signified by the attendance of angels. The Virgin Mother in the work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is with few exceptions shown in a mystical or 'idealized' form, clearly human but not recognizable as a particular individual. The connection between the interior life of the believer and the moments of the divine is often expressed vicariously. The disposition of adoration is represented by the shepherds or the Magi who come to visit the Christ-child. The sorrow and destitution which are the most negative conditions of human life are represented in very diverse ways by those who stand at the foot of the Cross or attend the Deposition: they include not only despair but also the faithful acceptance that what is a personal loss for those close to the Crucified Christ has the positive purpose of human salvation.

So the forces of the spiritual as conveyed in Christian art are *upwardness* and *inwardness*. In the argument of this book, these too are the properties of Christian architecture: it must invade the soul and elevate the spirit.

We may identify certain components of the upward and inward quest in a language that is drawn from Christian teaching but would serve as a formulation of the spiritual for non-theistic thought systems as well as for Christianity.

The first such component is the rejection of the material world. It may take the form of an escape or, in Marx's term, an opiate. Dante said the purpose of his *Divine Comedy* was to 'remove those living in this world from a state of misery and to bring them to a state of happiness' (quoted by Sherrard 1990: 49). In the teachings of Jesus, however, the alternative to worldly consciousness is a focus upon higher and eternal things. So the apostle Peter juxtaposes 'the outward adorning of plaiting the hair, or of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel' with 'the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which is in the sight of God of great price' (1 Peter 3:3-4). Thus the spiritual disposition is to aspire to and accumulate qualities outside the temporal realm. Jesus said 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for wheresoever your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matthew 6:19-20). The divine becomes a model for the human, albeit of course one that is never attainable. Whatever human love is, divine love is more pure. Forgiveness between human beings is imitative of the unconditional forgiveness of God. There is a perfect peace that is greater than the fragile accords that leaders of nations negotiate from time to time. This ideal, invisible and inaccessible spiritual domain appears in Christian art as the dove of the Holy Spirit, as the hand of God, as the host of angels; or it is signalled by the upward thrust of the Gothic vault and spire.

The contemplation of the beautiful, especially in the natural or created world, has the purposes of diverting thoughts from those things that corrupt, purifying the heart and engendering an attitude of thanksgiving and praise. So the counsel of the Apostle Paul is 'whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely ... if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things' (Philippians 4:8). Charles Allston Collins's *Convent Thoughts* shows a nun in an enclosed garden inhaling the fragrance of the many lilies that grow there. It is a statement about the vanity of the strife of the outside world: 'even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these' (Matthew 6:20). In the event not all moments of the spiritual quest are beautiful: some are agonizing; it is not, for example, upon the loveliness of the Crucified Christ upon which Hugo van der Goes invites us to gaze when we visit the Groeninge in Bruges.