

T1328

NC 0020558 3



National College of Art and Design

Fine Art, Sculpture

**Art and Transcendence: The Iconography of Patrick  
Pye**

by

Alannah Robins

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and  
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Fine Art, Sculpture,

1994

### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Patrick Pye and his wife, Noirin for their help and hospitality during my research. Many thanks also to Ms Gesa Thiessen, Richard Weber and to Dr. Paul O'Brien for his keen help and support.

## Table of Contents

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page No.</u>
List of Illustrations	4
Introduction	5
1. Transcendence:	8
Negative Transcendence	8
Radical Transcendence	9
Proximate Transcendence	11
Immanent Transcendence	13
Immanence	14
2. 'Freedom Within Chains'	16
3. Patrick Pye and his Influences	22
4. The Paintings:	24
The Narrative Works	24
Imagination and Abstraction	30
The Head of Christ	32
Conclusion	37
Bibliography	41



### List of Illustrations

1. Kiefer, Anselm, *Osiris and Isis*, 1985-7.
2. Roman, *Portrait of an unknown woman*, 1st century A.D.
3. Egypto-Roman, *Funerary portrait from Fayum*, 2nd-3rd centuries.
4. Coptic, *Icon*, 5th century.
5. Byzantine, *The Empress Theodora with attendants*, detail of mosaic in S. Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century.
6. Holman Hunt, William, *The Hireling Shepherd*.
7. Bacon, Francis, Second Version of *Painting*, 1946, 1971.
8. El Greco, *The Assumption*.
9. Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre, *The Poor Fisherman* (c. 1879-1881).
10. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption*.
11. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption* (detail).
12. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption* (detail).
13. Pye, Patrick, *The Maid of Israel*, etching.
14. Pye, Patrick, *St. Michael*, painting.
15. Pye, Patrick, *A Legend*, etching.
16. Pye, Patrick, *A Legend*, (detail).
17. Pye, Patrick, *Mob*.
18. Pye, Patrick, *Mocking of Christ or Christ at the Column*.
19. Pye, Patrick, *A Vision*, painting.
20. Pye, Patrick, *A Vision* (detail).
21. Pye, Patrick, *Clayware and Cloth*, etching.
22. Pye, Patrick, *St. Patrick on the Mountain*.
23. Pye, Patrick, *Madonna and Child*, (detail), stained glass.
24. Pye, Patrick, *St. Brigid*, stained glass.
25. Pye, Patrick, *The Word Within*, etching.
26. Pye, Patrick, *The Head of Christ*, (1) etching.
27. Pye, Patrick, *The Head of Christ*, (2) etching.
28. Book of Kells, *The Head of Christ*.
29. Giotto, *The Head of Christ*.
30. Rouault, George, *The Holy Face*.
31. Rouault, George, *The Head of Christ*.
32. Rouault, George, *Christ Mocked*.

## Introduction

The Christian artist, in a largely unbelieving age, finds that reasons for working are very much against the tide of modern and post-modern motivations. In this thesis I seek to explore the radical way in which the Christian artist must approach his/her subject. I speak of radicalism, simultaneously implying a work strongly rooted in the tradition of Christian iconography. The iconoclastic view of the modern artist sees radicalism in turning his back on tradition, and finding new media and means of expression, from within himself. Post-modernism puts a question mark over the concept of originality, but where it resorts to pastiche, I would like to explore a return to the motivations of the medieval artists which involved a humility before the Sacred Subject of an Incarnate God, sacrificing self-expression to dedication to a symbolic order designed to bring the viewer beyond the "circle of human response". "We do not look in order to see our poor love reflected in images of Christ. We need to gaze on that which draws us: the transcendent." (Pye, 1980, p.5)

Patrick Pye finds himself one of the few contemporary artists believing in a transcendent Deity, thereby looking outside himself and his own interests to an eternal Truth.

Frank Burch Brown, in defining transcendence as climbing *across*, rather than

ascending or descending, proposes four categories of transcendence : 'negative', 'radical', 'proximate' and 'immanent'. Each of these has potential possibilities of the aesthetic and of transcendence within human life. I think it would be helpful to look briefly at these various categories, prior to placing Pye within one of those traditions.

Following this, I would like to address the issue of 'freedom within chains' which belonged to the medieval artists, and the repercussions of a concept of 'sinlessness' resulting from modern man's search for freedom within himself. In Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, Maritain describes these as the first three phases of the evolution of the human Self, from being grasped as object, in the sacred exemplar of Christ's divine Self, to a sense of the human Self grasped as subject, in the creative subjectivity of man himself:

- 1) Within Byzantine art, with its glorious and royal, not suffering Christs, the human soul remains veiled behind sacred symbols and figures.

- 2) In Gothic architecture, the work of Giotto, Duccio and Grunewald, art is still dominated by sacred inspiration, Christ is still at the centre, but now it is Christ in his humanity, suffering.

- 3) The sense of the human Self and of human subjectivity "enters into a process of internalization and passes from the *object* depicted to the *mode* with which the artist forms his work. Then occurs the outburst of individualism...." (Maritain, 1981, p.23). With this internalization comes a concept of the sinless Self, and what I believe to be a lack of freedom resulting from reliance on Self. I myself, as a Christian artist, believing in a transcendent Deity, feel strongly the need to move beyond this circle of human self-expression, which leads to a plague of irredeemable subjectivity. Pye writes of how our subjection of the world makes it a prison:

"The built world is a mirror in which man sees only himself

reflected. The loss of our creaturely sense brings misery on us,  
it is time we thought about the marvellous again." (Pye,  
1991,p12)

It is this sense of the 'marvellous' that I want to focus on in this thesis, and  
how it is either decreased or augmented through the various levels of  
transcendence.





## Transcendence

### **Negative Transcendence:**

Most Christian theologians would assume the existence of divine transcendence in all possible ways and media, because God, the creator of all things visible and invisible, is infinitely beyond our experiences of space, time and thought. However, if He/She is totally beyond us, our 'experience' of Him/Her can be described as a "kind of Holy Void".(Brown,1990,p.117) Hans Kung describes how purely affirmative theology, without any negative theology turns God into "a creature of our intellect, a projection of our imagination."<sup>1</sup>

He quotes Nicholas of Cusa:

From the standpoint of negative theology there is nothing in God but infinitude. Accordingly, he is knowable neither in this world nor in the world to come, since all creatures, which cannot comprehend the infinite light, are darkness in comparison with him. (Kung, 1985, p.396)

This negatively experienced transcendence, rarely occupying the centre of Christian devotion, is receptive to expression which is largely that of "paradox

---

<sup>1</sup> This sense of negative theology should not be confused with that of Feuerbach (1804-72) who held the view that the notion of God is merely the outward projection of man's inward nature. He saw the root of alienation (man's sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social-isolation, or self-estrangement) lying in the institution of religion: the myths of divine power were merely ways in which man projected his own humanity outside himself, locating his own capacities and sensibilities elsewhere.



1. Kiefer, Anselm, *Osiris and Isis*, 1985-7.

and catachresis, the meaning of which is felt or intuited aesthetically rather than strictly thought out". (Brown,1990,p.118) Brown cites Meister Eckhart:

The final goal of being is the darkness or the unknowability of the hidden divinity, which is that light that shines "but the darkness has not comprehended it".

The aesthetic forms of service to such transcendence tend towards the nature of dark, vacant cells for meditation, or long, repetitive chants. Often, this experience is centered on the "eclipse, absence, or death" of God. (Brown,1990,p119) Anselm Kiefer's *Osiris and Isis* (Fig.1), presents the charred remains of sacred and political power, through a huge pyramid, and a burnt out circuit board from which dangerous-looking copper wiring spreads. Positive perceptions of the world are here challenged, and the world is left to feel "nothing inherently holy and abiding, and nonetheless something More [is] signalled by what is taken to be only a sign and neither presence nor genuine mediator." (Brown,1990,p118)

### **Radical Transcendence:**

Brown describes radical transcendence as one which is as communicative as if "it were an electrical charge that could arc across an infinite gulf between heaven and earth"(Brown,1990,p119) Although God, as known to himself, remains essentially incomprehensible to humans, He chooses, in acts of self-communication, especially in the Incarnation, to relate to us, according to our limitations. Christians of the Reformed line (mainly Calvinist) are those for whom the experience of radical transcendence predominates. While confronted by a God of Unlikeness, with a sense of personal incapacity to bear or comprehend the infinite, the Reformed experience is not consigned to darkness or silence. While His infinite goodness is deemed



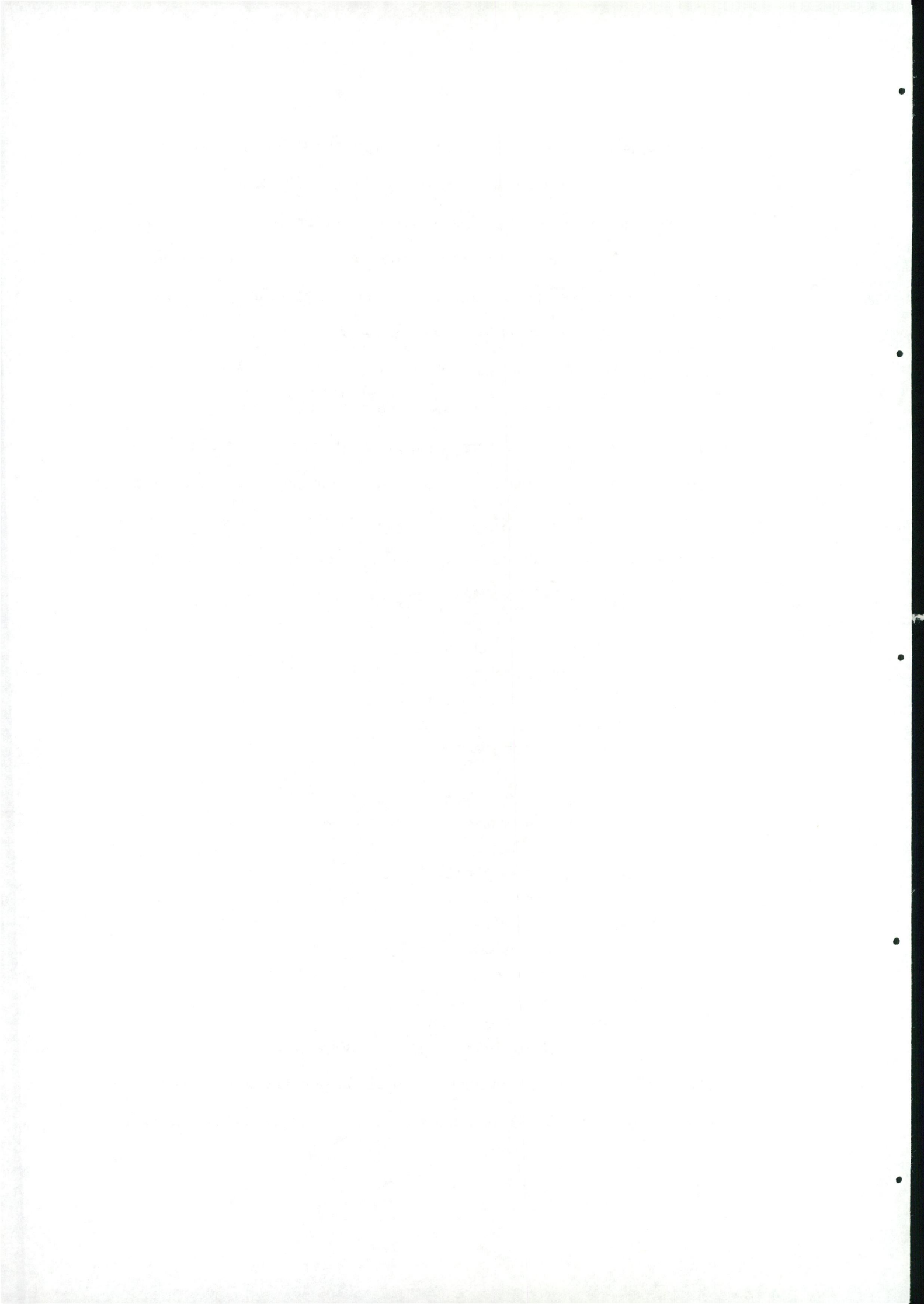
unapproachable from our side, yet "when a radically transcendent God wills to be encountered, it will come to pass." (Brown, 1990, p. 120) This God makes use of "aesthetic forms, among others, to mediate or prepare for divine self-disclosure.... The Holy Spirit is seen, in short, as a transcendently magnificent poet." Much Calvinist metaphysical poetry, such as that of George Herbert, was of religious value because of its capacity to reveal its own incapacity, thereby functioning as a vehicle of religious receptivity. Rhys, in his introduction to Herbert's Poems, remembers the poet's life as "that eager struggle of wasted body and devout spirit..." (Sharp, 1889, p. xiv) Those receptive of the poetry were conveyed further than possible by means of rational or discursive forms. It becomes the "vehicle of its own abandonment, and potentially of the corresponding abandonment of self to the action of grace necessary for salvation." (Brown, 1990, p. 121) Herbert writes:

Soul's joy, when Thou art gone,  
And I alone,  
Which cannot be,  
Because Thou dost abide with me,  
And I depend on Thee;

Yet when Thou dost suppress  
The cheerfulness  
Of Thy abode,  
And in my powers not stir abroad,  
But leave me to my load -

O what a damp and shade  
Doth me invade!  
No stormy night  
Can so afflict, or so affright,  
As thy eclipsed light. (Sharp, 1889, p. 192)

The aesthetic of the Puritan meeting houses in New England is again more evident of the self-effacing conviction that human effort can bring the divine no



closer, offering nothing but the worshippers' own impoverishment. The plainness and simplicity of form in these houses testify that nothing made with human hands can be called 'God's house'. The one sensuous art employed by the Reformed tradition is music, intangible, "the physical medium of which conveniently self-destructs rather than remaining as a potential distraction and temptation." (Brown,1990,p121)

### **Proximate Transcendence:**

Within the Eastern Orthodox and Anglo-Catholic traditions there is an understanding of transcendence which is proximate or 'near'. A great sense of sacramentality extends, beyond the consecrated elements of the Eucharist, to other things of this world by which God's presence is mediated. Their use of abundant aesthetic means of meditation, bells and incense, poetic language, cumulatively create a "rich sensory and imaginative milieu that contributes to one's awareness of sacramental presence." (Brown,1990,p.124) While it is irrefutable that Christ's presence depends not on lofty space, incense and music, God's transcendence is not efficacious for the partaker unless he is properly receptive. The aesthetics of the Roman Catholic tradition work in the viewer against pride or despair, which might cause alienation from the Eucharist. Beyond this again there is a great range of mediation within Catholicism, by liturgical acts, saints and angels, by the Blessed Virgin and the persons of the Holy Trinity - all this is in itself aesthetically mediated to the worshipper. Theoretically, the Western church has justified its arts pedagogically, but this evidence would seem to suggest that the arts grant access to a God who will approach and be approached. From the 'purging' quality of monastic art, through the accessibility of the folk-like 'Alleluia's' of Taize, the chastity of art preferred by John of Salisbury, or the 'corporeal religiosity' of

Rubens and much Baroque, there is sense of the 'potential proximity' of the divine. This extends also to the realm of nature, which itself is in no part God, but, according to Brown, perpetually participates in the being of God. Similarly, "all light and all beauty in nature as well as in art share in some way in the light and beauty of God's glory and point beyond themselves to the Invisible Light and Beauty that can be seen directly only in the spiritual Beatific Vision." Roman Catholicism, however, is not the only religious tradition wherein the transcendent is proximate. Others, with quite different theological assumptions include Free Church Protestantism, especially in lower-income Black congregations of America. Three features stand as different to those of Catholicism.

(1.) Within the African-American churches, proximate transcendence is less connected with the mediation of the church *per se*, rather it is ascribed to the power of the Holy Spirit and the Living Christ, who operate freely, outside institutions. The ensuing spiritual and aesthetic freedom - within bounds - lets the 'Spirit move as it wills'.

Brown tells us that Charles Wesley's fifth rule for singing hymns, of which he and his brother John wrote nearly six thousand, was this: 'Sing modestly. Do not bawl'. Methodists, Black Methodists in particular, have little fear of 'bawling' when the Spirit moves them. The preaching, frequently improvisatory, is characterised by striking, colloquial images, 'vivid narratives' and 'powerful cadences', all charged with emotion. The God celebrated in this religious aesthetic is He who "liberates and saves delivering Daniel from the fiery furnace, Israel from Egypt's land and prayer and praise from the shackles of rigid propriety". (Brown, 1990, p. 127)

(2.) The transcendent God of this tradition is participative as well as proximate, and anthropomorphic: "jubilant, angry, passionate, tender".



Sacred and secular style are therefore only narrowly distinguishable. The aesthetics of a God who, rather than remaining aloof and unconcerned, comes as the Jesus who mixes with sinners, tend therefore towards being "earthy, eclectic, and generally uninhibited."

(3.) The aesthetic predominant here is largely popular and egalitarian. While this does not mean a lack of standards of quality, the aesthetics expressive of God's close nature of transcendence have an immediacy and accessibility, itself a vehicle and sign of the 'immediacy and accessibility of God's own saving power and grace.'

#### **Immanent Transcendence:**

Despite the closeness of this God, very few Christians of the above traditions regard the earth and humanity as already divine. This is characteristic, rather, of immanent transcendence. Here, God is experienced as the extraordinary and miraculous reality present and *in* us, rather than near or to us, not that anything on earth can contain the divine completely, but that all things "contain and are contained by what is always more than merely finite and temporal". (Brown, 1990, p. 128)

Martin Luther, with passion and perplexity, expresses something of this:

God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all, but without His being encompassed and surrounded by it.....These are all exceedingly incomprehensible matters; yet they are articles of our faith and are attended clearly and mightily in Holy Writ....For how can reason tolerate it that the Divine majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, over a grain, through a grain, within and without, and that, although it is a single majesty, it nevertheless is entirely in each grain separately?.....And that the same Majesty is so large that neither this world nor a thousand worlds can encompass it and

say : 'Behold, there it is!'

Luther insisted that in the sacrament Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the elements. Here, it is the whole world that is the sacrament. In contrast to neo-Platonic sacramentalism,<sup>2</sup> we see more than just a hint of God's presence in creation, and in contrast to the beliefs of Thomas Aquinas, His presence does not require a hierarchy of beings and powers. Instead, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'.(Gerald Manly Hopkins)

### **Immanence:**

Immanence conceives God as residing in and throughout the created universe, not as outside and separate from it. Pantheism<sup>3</sup>, of which immanence is a predominant characteristic, in contrast to Classical Theism is characterised by expressions of the divine as intimate rather than alien, as indwelling and dwelling near rather than remote. Such immanence encourages man's sense of individual participation in the divine life without the necessity of mediation by any institution. However, it has occasionally been seen to have a formless enthusiasm, without the moderating influence of institutional forms. Some theorists have felt it unseemly that the divine is so easily confronted and appropriated. Whereas both immanence and immanent transcendence are related to the mystical intuition of personal union with God, the latter retains a greater sense of the need to initiate that union by seeking

---

<sup>2</sup>Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism, held that the 'One' or 'Good' is utterly beyond the reach of thought or language, and while no concept or definition of the 'Good' is possible, it is a positive reality of an abundant excellence. Matter is held to be the principle of evil, and utterly negative.

<sup>3</sup> Pantheism, a term of recent origin, stresses the all-embracing inclusiveness of God, as reflected in the prefix "pan-" (Greek *pas*, "all"). While this is generally contrasted with the theistic belief in His separateness, it can be seen as a version of Theism which emphasises the immanence - the indwelling presence - of God.

the Deity outside his/her self. In the modern age, with a merging of oriental influences, the new physics and Western Romanticism, the immanence of the transcendent has come to the fore. The supernatural is found in the natural. God becomes the Christ within. In a similar sense, Henri Bergson equated God with creativity. The problem which arises for me here is that of the goodness of God, as creativity is "both creator and destroyer; it is beyond good and evil." (Jencks, ed., 1992, p. 374) Hinduism, and some other traditions use this language as part of the divine reality, but the biblical tradition conceives of a divinity that is perfectly good. The relocation of God to the 'Christ within' either challenges this perfect Deity, or raises our 'Self' to an equal plane of sinlessness. Pye writes: "Since modern people assume that the ego is the norm that is to be developed, they assume that what denies the self must be frustrating and distorting." (Pye, 1980, p. 35)

While I find myself faltering between 'proximate' and 'immanent' transcendence, I am convinced that my freedom lies in being 'bound' to God, and His laws according to the Biblical tradition, a freedom lost within this last category of 'Immanence'.



### 'Freedom within Chains'

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery....

.....For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbour." (R.S.V., Galatians,5v1&13)

Within Classical Theism, the concept of a separate God allows for the goodness of that Deity, and thme imperfection of humanity. Pye writes of sin:

Sin and the concept of sin bring me a freedom, for they make the law objective and impersonal (as it is) and this law eventually becomes the bedrock against which I learn to know myself. (Pye,1980,p36)

However, as soon as God resides as the 'Christ within', modern man has lost his freedom that comes from bondage to God and His law, and must start looking inward for truth. Complacency sets in, towards an art of fragmented languages, which speaks to no one because of its lack of a comprehensible symbolic order. "When the artist's religious impulse is individual only",writes Barzun, "no longer linked with doctrine or ritual, then, while faith may strengthen his hand, it leaves him to invent his own symbols, with no guarentee that they will be intelligible or moving." (Barzun, 1973, p25)

Patrick Pye writes of the painter of a Crucifix , for whom the subject is sacred



and hidden, as one whose art reminds him of the reality beyond the visual or tangible. Here images take on a fixed meaning, beyond an individual will to form.

This is the character of all sacred ... art: once the image is charged with its meaning it becomes archetypal and must not be changed. All medieval art, both in Europe and Asia, testifies to this. (Pye, 1980, p. 12)

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" were the words of the Son of God as He spoke of the coming of the end of the world. (R.S.V., Matthew, 24v.34) If, therefore, we are dealing, as Christian artists, with an eternal truth, to be reflected in our art, it is crucial that we subscribe to the belief in 'freedom within chains', of 'redemption in sacrifice', as our 'selves' become secondary to the transcendent Deity. This attitude is reflected in the humility of the Medieval iconographer, or the Gothic stone mason, in which his devotion to the Deity, and his service, renders him free. The changefulness of the Gothic bears witness to this freedom, and the belief that all things work together for the good enables the artist to join frankness with depth of religious feeling as he admits both the imperfection of the workman and the imperfection of the subject. (Ruskin, 1960, p. 171) In disguising neither, Gothic ornament creates the space for imaginative and individually expressive work, while bearing witness to the shared symbolic order by which the community lived their lives.

The Gothic solution, though aesthetically attractive, relies heavily on an informing religious faith. In The Idea of the Holy, Otto explores the nature of the *numen*, and the soul's creature-consciousness as the emotion of a creature "submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures". (Otto, 1969, p. 10) The religious conception of predestination is nothing but the same creature consciousness, self abasement and the annulment of personal strength, claims and achievements in

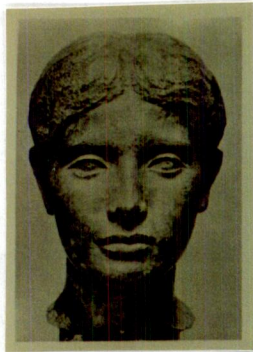
the presence of the transcendent. The numen becomes the all-in-all. The creature becomes nothing. The conceptual expression indicating such a felt "submergence and annihilation over and against the numen is then - here impotence and there omnipotence; here the futility of one's own choice, and there the will that ordains all and determines all." (Otto, 1969,p.89) Predestination, as identical with the absolute supremacy of the numen has nothing to do with the 'unfree will' of 'Determinism'.

In the face of the eternal power man is reduced to naught, *together with* his free choice and action. And the eternal power waxes immeasurable just because it fulfills its decrees *despite* the freedom of human will. (Otto, 1969,p.89)

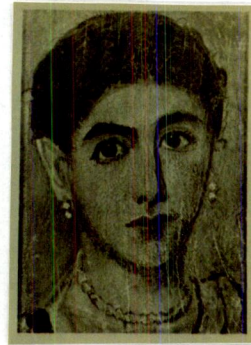
In many Muslim narratives professing to display the inflexibility of Allah's decrees, men are able to devise, decide and reject. But however they choose to act, Allah's eternal will is accomplished to the very day and hour that it was ordained.

The purport of this is not that God and God alone is active, but that the activity of the creature, "be it never so vigorous and free, is overbourned and determined absolutely by the eternal purpose."

During the Renaissance, artists of genius were appearing everywhere. Burckhart sees this as analogous to the experience of the soul when spiritual discipline is abandoned. Background psychic tendencies come to the fore, accompanying exciting possibilities yet to be explored, which lose their attraction as soon as the initial pressure on the soul is relaxed.(Burckhart,1967,p143) The emancipation of the ego is then the dominant motive, and individualistic expansivity asserts itself. Iris Murdoch writes:



2. Roman, *Portrait of an unknown woman*, 1st century A.D.



3. Egypto-Roman, *Funerary portrait from Fayum*, 2nd-3rd centuries..



4. Coptic, *Icon*, 5th century



5. Byzantine, *The Empress Theodora with attendants*, detail of mosaic in S. Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century.



... we can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world." (Murdoch, 1970, p.59)

Gradually the new planes conquered are permeated by decay. A powerful spring of action for nascent painting was the discovery of the nude which was excluded in the spiritual economy of traditional Christian art. The role of Christian iconography was to recall theological truths, not natural beauties, and so, only when art began to imitate nature was the absence of the nude felt. Priests were custodians of the word. Image is only the inference of the word in the heart, so iconography developed first as a discipline of contemplation. By a simple comparison of four portraits, leading to a period of iconography we can see a similar change. The Roman bust (Fig.2) is merely realistic, "an inner flame illumined the expression" of the Fayum portrait (Fig.3), "it seemed to consume the outershell and it gave rise to the icon." (Fig.4) Finally, the flat, stylised, symmetrical face was "no more that a penetrating gaze which "laid bare the soul." (Fig.5) (Huyghe, 1968,p13)

The introduction of mathematical perspective reduced the formal language of painting to a closed system, "opaque to every gleam of the supernatural". (Burckhart,1967,p.145) Hand in hand with these characteristics of nascent painting was the new use of colour in representing illumination indispensable to the artifice of perspective, and so the chromatic symbolism of the medievals was lost to the play of an imaginary light. In sculpture, the new possibilities lay in attempts to capture instantaneous movement, while their material was static.

The Nazarenes, a brotherhood of young German painters formed in 1809, saw a semi-monastic existence as absolutely necessary for their reaction against eighteenth century neoclassicism, and their return to the medieval spirit in



6. Holman Hunt, William, *The Hireling Shepherd*.

painting. In its reaction against 18th century Neoclassicism, the brotherhood was the first effective anti-academic movement in European painting. The Nazarenes believed that all art should serve a moral or religious purpose. The Pre-Raphaelites, painting in the mid-nineteenth century, admired the directness of art before the High Renaissance, making a return to painting directly from nature and defying the European academic tradition which idolized the classicism of Raphael. Repelled by materialism and social oppression, they also sought to focus on moral and religious subject matter. Both these movements can be seen as guilty of overattention to detail to the detriment of pictorial unity. See William Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd*, (Fig.6) where our eyes find no single point to draw our attention. Instead, the sheep in the left-background, the subject of the couple, and the background-right of trees are all painted in equally sharp focus. It is interesting that, in contrast to these two movements of similar motivations to himself, while Pye's strength lies in his attaining pictorial unity by means of strips of colour or etched lines, his weakness has been pointed out by Rivers to be in his drawing:

Any criticism that I make of Patrick Pye's work is a general one rather than of any particular picture. There is always a lack of confidence in his drawing in which the detail is not expressed with the same certainty as he achieves in the outside contour.  
(Rivers, p44)

Traditional Christian art is obedient to a spiritual economy, and within those limits, freedom is found. The new possibilities released by the abandonment of such an economy cannot be coordinated around a single centre. The tendency is then centrifugal, resulting in modalities of vision and expression which are mutually exclusive.

The stylistic periods of European art in the last five centuries are exemplary of this restlessness.





7. Bacon, Francis, Second Version of *Painting*, 1946, 1971.

Traditional art has not this dynamism, but it is not for that reason 'frozen': the traditional artist, protected by the 'magic circle' of sacred form, creates both like a child and like a sage: the models he reproduces are symbolically timeless. (Burckhart, 1967, p. 144)

We have a choice. Either we seek the Infinite in simple form, through its qualitative aspects, and sacrificing some possible developments, or we seek the Infinite in the apparent diversity and change which must lead to exhaustion and dispersion.

Concerning those who have chosen the second option, we need only look as far as any of the site-specific art installed in banks to see how often art has become just an extension of a financial institution itself. If this does not lead us to commit ourselves to a spiritual economy and seek the Infinite through self-sacrifice, surely Damien Hirst's performance of slicing a cow with her calf in the Venice Biennale, 1993, or any of Francis Bacon's contorted, decimated figures (eg. Fig. 7) will, through horror and disgust, evict us from this household of destructive and exhausted 'avant-garde'.



## Patrick Pye and his Influences

Patrick Pye was born in 1929, in Winchester, of Irish English parentage. When his mother, a music teacher moved to Dublin in 1932, Ireland became his home. He studied art under Oisín Kelly while at school in St. Columba's College, and later under Elizabeth Rivers. He started painting at the age of 14, and attended the National College of Art where he studied painting under Maurice McGonigal, and later returned for a course in stained glass with John Murphy. In 1963, Pye was received into the Roman Catholic church, having been reared in Anglicanism. He is married to Noírin Kennedy, with two children.

In 1954, travels in Europe brought him in contact with Romanesque sculpture and Giotto. These two strong influences turned his attention to the problems of Christian iconography. Barasche records how the most striking aspect of Giotto's gestures is their 'ability to show the figure's inner life.' The artist's primary source "was not uncontrolled nature, carefully and independently observed; it was rather the gestural patterns provided by established social acts." (Barasche, 1987, p.13) Most of these gestures were taken from highly crystallised patterns of ritualized movement and behaviour, for example, the gesture of incapacity, in which arms hang down, one hand grasping the wrist of the other arm. These transplanted gestures retain their meaning, as symbols, and part of a language understood by the community at large.

In his first chapter of The Time Gatherer, Pye describes his first encounter with El Greco's paintings. A sixteen year old, he turned to his mother with news of his conversion : " 'I know,' said my mother, 'El Greco does seem to do that to people , but I wouldn't take it too seriously.'" He went on to describe her: "My mother was musical, I allowed, but I could see that when she looked at paintings her music was left on some remote shelf." (Pye,1991, p11) William Blake affected Pye, by his philosophical epigrams and poems, and his description of the imagination was definitive for Pye, but in his disappointment with Blake as a painter, he was convinced by El Greco, who practised what the other preached. Of Blake he writes:

The sources for the bricks and mortar of his style were just too evident to convince me that imagination had always been allowed to complete its labour. With El Greco I felt no such qualms.  
(Pye,1991,p.12)

In taking such influence from Romanesque sculpture and Giotto, Pye finds himself committed to the task of iconography, of reflecting the transcendent God with "calm and reflective detachment" (Stuart, 1975, p30). With the Byzantine experience of God through the mystery of the Eucharist, we could safely place Pye within the category of "Proximate Transcendence." However, these are not Pye's sole influences. El Greco caused a great upheaval for Pye in his youth, and at the end of his book about the former,The Time-Gatherer, he writes of a Sufi Mystic, and the necessity to balance the separateness of God with an awareness of His immanent nature. I have loosely divided the artist's work into those paintings I would describe as 'narrative', and those in which an increased abstraction encourages a more meditative approach to the work.



8. El Greco, *The Assumption* .



9. Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre,  
*The Poor Fisherman* (c. 1879-1881).





10. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption*.





## The Paintings

### The Narrative Works

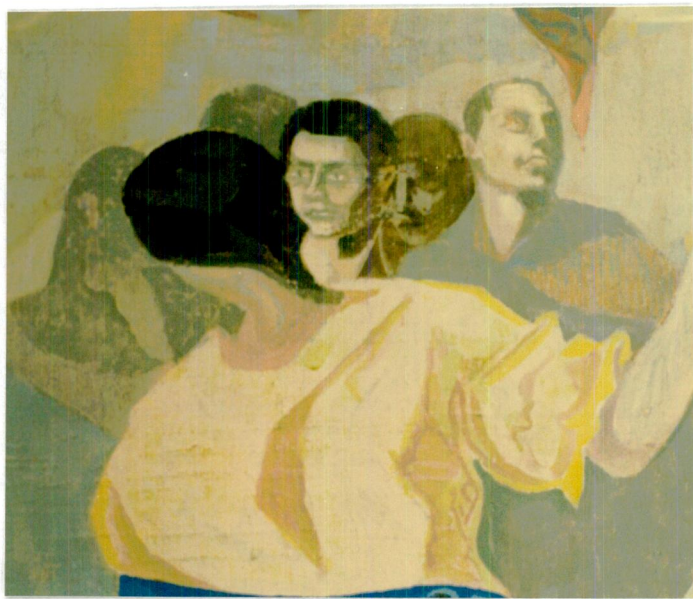
We established, in the last chapter, the 'timelessness' and changelessness of any sacred or magic art, because of this, the medievals had no qualms about imitation. The Incarnation gave man an image, and painting was a

.....storehouse of information for the Christian church,  
rich in stories of the Saints, with an aesthetic that appealed to  
the intelligent and subject matter that was read by all alike.  
(Rivers, p40)

*The Assumption*, (Fig.8) after El Greco, encompasses both this freedom to imitate and many other characteristics of Pye's paintings. The artist sees this painting as something of a 'Puvis de Chavannes'. Finding El Greco's painting very nervous and unrestful, he brought a greater calmness with Puvis's colours (Fig.9). This painting was repainted a great many times, as he refined again and again the essence of El Greco's painting. In the latter's painting, "Our Lady dominates a tightly knit group of angels which swirls and spins towards the heights of heaven" (Fig.10)(Pye, 1991, p37) The calmness of her ascent into heaven is linked to the confusion of the apostles only by the hem of her skirt hanging over the crescent moon, and this is reproduced by Pye. He simplifies the "series of low slung arcs" dominating the structure of the painting, into abstract shapes and colours, which formed the group of angels around our Lady. (Fig.11) Each of these arcs is retained by Pye, but the contrast between the



11. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption* (detail).

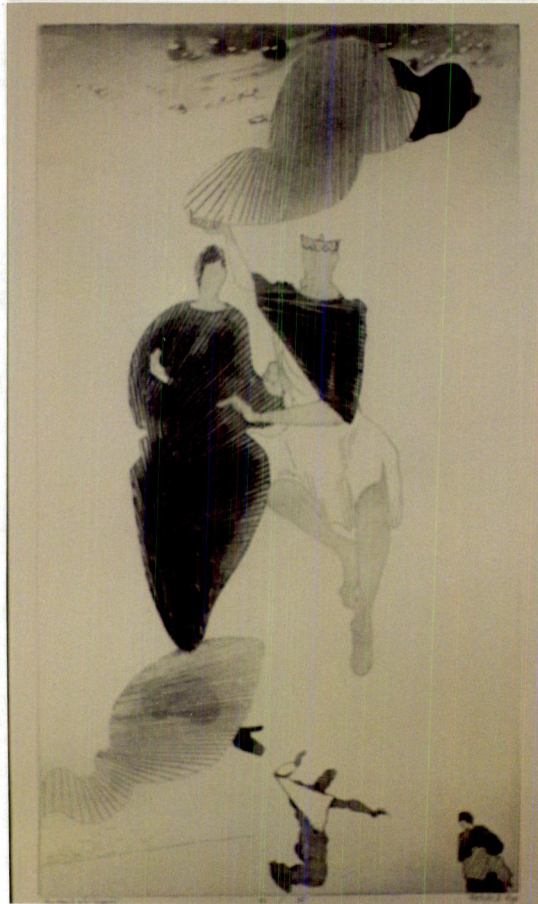


12. Pye, Patrick, *The Assumption* (detail).



heavenly and the earthly regions is intensified by their simplicity. Again, the apostles are divided by the sepulchre out of which she has risen. Pye also shows the angel on the right as if springing from our Lady's armpit, but their garments merge, so that the link jolts us less than that of the apostle who is thrown forward, to rub cheek to jowl with the apostle whose back faces us in the main foreground (Fig.12). Pye describes the arcs as assuring the "continuity of the form, the empirium of airborne existence". (Pye,1991, p38) These are part of the spatial devices that Pye also employs, instead of using the imitative perspective used by Renaissance painters. "The similitude of the figures would not have such power over us were it not for the totality of the space the artist conceived". (Pye,1991,p39) By his use of the strips of colour, alternately warm and cold, Pye seeks to bring a unity to his paintings, so that no one part on any painting is alienated by either its warmth or coldness. This method draws our attention to those few figures which are painted in a uniform colour. It seems strange that in *The Assumption*, therefore, it is the apostle on the left, in his yellow and blue garments, who draws our gaze. How is it that this apostle deserves the primary attention of the viewer? This figure particularly lacks the confidence of the draughtsman's hand, and yet, his raised hand guides us up to the unity of the heavenly figures, again heightening the contrast of their weightlessness against the apostles' nervousness. This tentative quality is commonly found in his figures painted without strips of colour.

Another purpose of these lines is to avoid saying 'too much about the figures', rather than describing them naturalistically, and to give a spatial direction, without using the devices of the Renaissance. The angel on the right seems to float inside her stiff, board-like skirt. *The Maid of Israel* (Fig.13) floats similarly in a space free of directional lines, a space somewhere beyond the confusion and grief of the apostles beneath. Seated at His right hand, she is



13. Pye, Patrick, *The Maid of Israel*, etching.



14. Pye, Patrick, *St. Michael*, painting.



received into Heaven by her Divine Son and is crowned by Him as Queen of Heaven. Ferguson writes of how the Coronation of the Virgin was believed to have been foreshadowed by an episode in Solomon's life when

...after the death of David and the coronation of Solomon as king of the Israelites his mother, Bathsheba, came to ask a favour. 'And the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the king's mother; and she sat on his right hand.' (1 Kings 2:19). (Ferguson, 1971, p76)

Pye defines himself as a narrative painter, and Ferguson goes on to describe how within the Christian tradition, narrative pictures of the Coronation of the Virgin were distinguished from allegorical pictures of the Queen of Heaven, by the appearance in them of events of the last days of her life on earth, including the deathbed, the tomb, or the Apostles and friends on earth weeping for her. The last are just hinted at by Pye, but they also seem to float in a strange directionless space. *St. Michael* (Fig.14) slays the dragon within a space defined by the various directions of the alternate strips of purple and orange. Pye described direction and space as being what defined an age of painting: the vertical direction of the Gothic, the stage direction of the Renaissance, or the confused direction of the Baroque. For Pye, these lines 'loose' the physicality of the figures and their settings, to bring us, symbolically, beyond, to the realm of the spirit.

In *A Legend* (Fig.15) the artist narrates what he does not believe to be a legend, but the story which has come down to us over the ages as such. Here the story is told in the form of a triptych, comprising of *Elegy*, *Instruments of the Passion*, and *Entombment*. While the central panel is square, the two outside images are contained by panels with slightly arched tops.

In the two paintings which preceded this etching, great expanses of ground were





15. Pye, Patrick, *A Legend*, etching



16. Pye, Patrick, *Instruments of the Passion*, (detail of *A Legend*)

painted grey, with a base of green. When Pye came to this etching, he decided to experiment with the base of green, which eventually became synonymous with fields. 'A mannerist image', he described it, the various directions and plains within the fields give a feel of the passing down of the story of Christianity over ages and through many languages. Again without using perspective, he has created a space and time within which to place his figures. However, in this, one of his earlier works, he has not employed the strips of colour by which we identify so much of his later work. St. John and Our Lady sit in the foreground of the centre panel, *Instruments of the Passion*, (Fig.16) as hieratic figures. Through our relation to these, two of the founders of the church, we find ourselves also gazing, as members of that church, on the events of the crucifixion of our Lord.

In my interview with the artist he spoke of how painted space is artificial space, and how "we must convince people that this is not an artifice". Often, Pye employs a figure in the foreground, to enable us to relate to the happenings of the scene. In *Mob*, (Fig.17) these figures are aggressive, and active partakers in the crowd shouting 'Crucify Him!'

In Apples and Angels Pye writes of devotional imagery, that he who

....would treat of sacred and religious themes cannot be concerned with 'the devotional', because devotion is ours.....  
We do not look in order to see our poor love relected in images of Christ. We need to gaze on that which draws us: the transcendent.  
Our own motor does not carry us there. (Pye, 1980,p5)

How consistent this is with an art that employs the figures of rebellion, or hieratical figures, to lead us beyond to the figure carrying His cross? In speaking thus of devotional imagery, he speaks in line with the theory of radical transcendence, which I explored in the last chapter. However, at another point he talks in a manner which reflects the awe-struck nature of negative transcendence. He writes of the painter for whom the crucifixion is a hidden and



17. Pye, Patrick, *Mob*



18. Pye, Patrick, *Mocking of Christ or Christ at the Column*.





sacred event, as one whose “art will remind him of the reality it is not,...”  
(Pye,1990,p11)

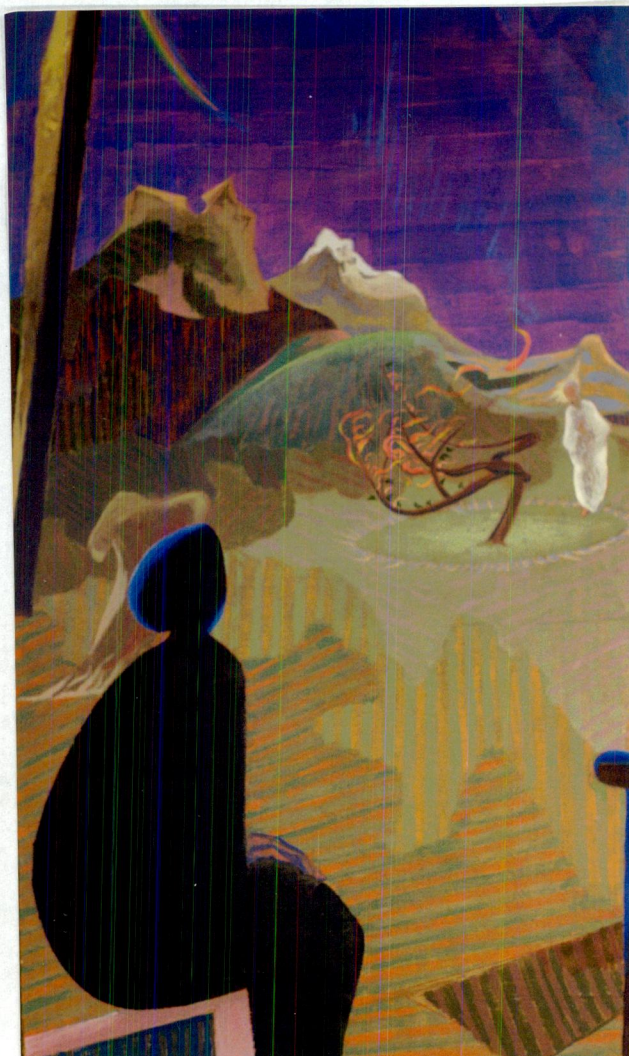
When I asked him what he meant by this, the artist referred to Picasso’s ‘art is the lie that makes us realise the truth’. “How does one approach the Holy?” he said. “...not by simple communication.” It becomes a series of negatives, as we describe what it is not. This is quite a different approach than that which wants not to see our ‘poor love reflected in images of Christ’, which would seem to me to advocate a meditation on the Sacred.

In *Mocking of Christ* or *Christ at the Column* (Fig.18) there is not the same obvious use of a large foreground figure to convey us into the meaning of the painting, however, one of the etchings that led to this painting is entitled *Present*. Here the artist is one of those observers of the mocking of Christ. This proximity to the theme comes from what the artist described as an obsession with the event. The painting that I saw was the sixth depiction. Pye described to me a dream in which he was present at the mocking of our Lord. There was a Black African also present whom he was hitting with a sword, again and again. Eventually he began to draw small globules of blood, at which point the dream ended. In that etching, *Present*, the African stands, legs astride, and to the right a figure, sitting, swings a tall sword high in the air. Christ is small and distant. In the later painting, Christ is also distant, small and pink. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth...” (R.S.V. Isaiah, 53v.7) He leans on a waist-high column, under an architectural form. Three figures stand in the foreground, arms outstretched to mock this man, yet debilitated, they seem unable to touch or harm Him. His presence of peace prohibits their aggressive attitude. They are thrown into a cubist kind of space as we view them from an aerial ‘perspective’, and Christ from a level distance. Rivers writes of a triptych of this subject: “The figures are set as on a stage, seen from above, the





19. Pye, Patrick, *A Vision*



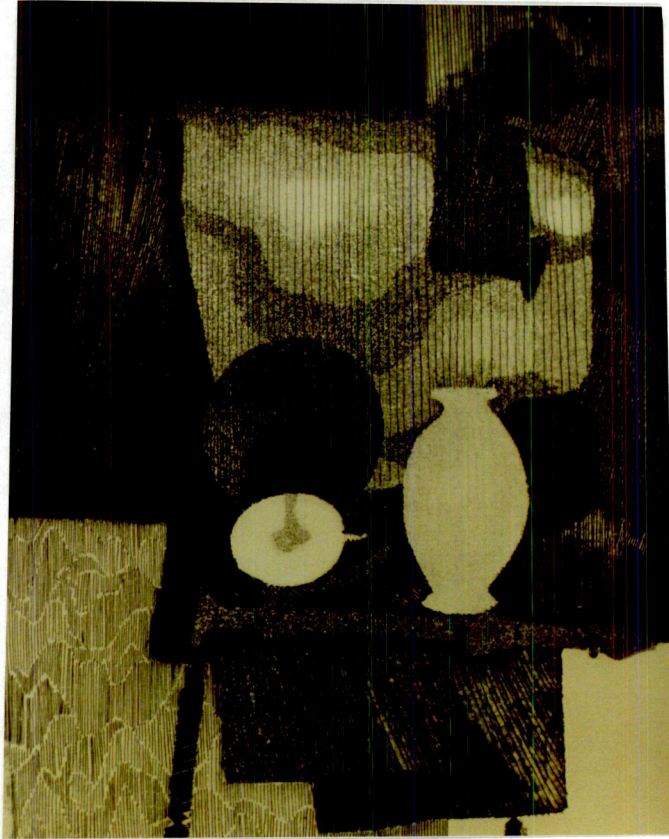
20. Pye, Patrick, *A Vision*  
(detail)

mockers deformed and faceless with extended arms vilify an almost stubborn Christ..." (Rivers,p44) All other paintings depicting Christ at the column show a tall, substantial column, however, after the resolution of this painting, when visiting Rome, Pye found the alleged column to be only waist high. In his painting, the very smallness of Christ, and the column on which he leans seem to accentuate the power of his presence by the effect it has on his accusers.

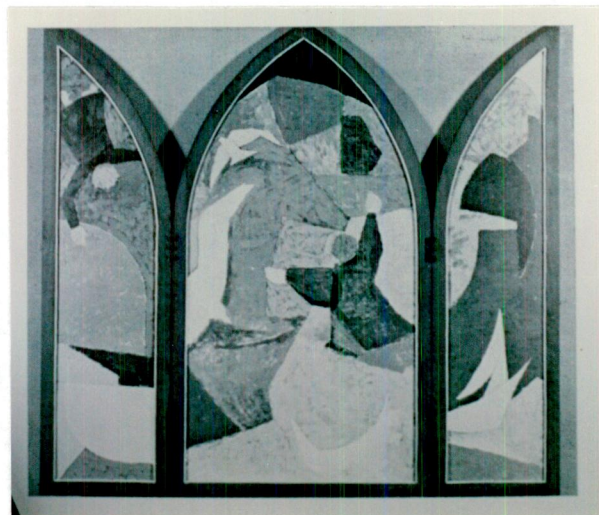
In *A Vision* (Fig.19), a recent painting, the silhouetted figure of a grave-digger sits beside an open grave in the foreground. The lid of the grave has been thrown in the air and hangs strangely on the left of the tall thin painting. High in the blue-purple sky, a tiny Christ speeds off into infinity, crowned by the great arc of a rainbow, which is doubled on the left. As Christ is encircled by this symbol of the new covenant established by God after the great flood, below this, just beyond the open grave, the burning bush of Moses is encircled, with small lines that seem to radiate light.(Fig.20) This is holy ground, where God bid Moses take off his shoes, and here the old covenant is as a small island, at the centre of this visionary experience. "I am fascinated by silhouette", the artist said. There, one can imply a figure, saying little about it, and let another object or figure describe it in some other way. Silhouette is also used in this way in *The Rest of the Holy Family* where the family sits in some kind of narrow passage, in the background a beam projects across a shaft of light, the nature of this silhouette is uncertain, and the artist felt that it would be better described, by more specific light where it sits against the wall. Imagination, Pye writes, "spiritualises what is corporeal, and embodies what is spiritual."(Pye,1991,p120) In writing this of imagination he appraises that intuitive approach that he seemed to avoid in his imitation of the medievals.

I see this as a balance, rather than a contradiction, in Pye's writings. However, I was disappointed not to see this level of imagination in his visual work - very





21. Pye, Patrick, *Clayware and Cloth*, etching



22. Pye, Patrick, *St. Patrick on the Mountain*.

few of his narrative pieces seemed to recreate this delicate tension of imagination and humility.

#### Imagination and Abstraction.

Imagination is, of course the gift by which the artist uncovers the reality behind the reality so unanimously acknowledged. And the reality behind the reality is nothing other than the inter-relationship of all things, the different levels of their coherence to a total idea of the world. From this it follows that to paint an apple is just as much a leap into the dark, an act of faith, as to paint an invisible being, an angel. (Pye,1980, p.6)

*Clayware and Cloth* (Fig,21)is one of those 'apples' through which Pye uncovers a reality behind the objects' corporeality. This etching is very abstract, and grew out of a love for tone. This is evident by his use of aquatint to a degree much greater than in his other etchings. The deeply etched lines give a sense of space, devoid of perspective, as he fills the floor space with broken patches of lines. The silhouetted chair leg is further defined by the cloth hanging over the back of the chair in full light. Corot's reference to the importance of the two brightest objects of a painting, can be seen in the relationship between the vase and the inside of the cup. The rules of 'stage' lighting are overthrown here, as light radiates from inside a cup, and is thrown onto a vase.

In his triptych of *St. Patrick*, (Fig.22)perhaps because of its original execution in glass, there is an increased degree of abstraction.The story told is that of the saint praying on a mountain, as black birds of despair flew about his head. Shortly after, hearing music, he found that white birds of hope had replaced the dark ones. The central panel shows the Saint looking up to the



23. Pye, Patrick, *Madonna and Child*, (detail), stained glass, Mercy Convent, Cookstown.



24. Pye, Patrick, *St. Brigid*, stained glass, Loughrea Cathedral.



white birds, while on the left, he is depicted upside down, stretched amongst abstract shapes, which permeate the whole composition. In the abstract shapes alone there is a marked movement of the brightness from the bottom left to the top right hand corner. Weber describes this triptych as one in which the “representative and the abstract are well wedded. One feels that they never should be separated; they should always be seen thus, hand in hand.” (Weber, 1962,p14)

In his stained glass work there is a very strong balance of the abstract and the representational. Rivers, in her criticism of his drawing, elaborates that this is more evident in his paintings than in his stained glass “which leads me to think that if his designs were carried out on a larger scale he would rectify this weakness.” ( Rivers, p44) In *Madonna and Child*, (Fig.23) situated in the Convent of Mercy, Cookstown, Co. Tyrone, the Madonna’s face is symbolically illuminated, as is the body of the child - their halos, blue and yellow, are decorated with stained ‘blobs’, and much of the background abstractly throws forward the figure of Our Lady with its relative brightness. “With stained glass, I use antique glass, French or English.....The lead lines are important, but they come after the colour. They have to grow out of the form.” Both here, and in Creagh Church, Ballinasloe, and Loughrea Cathedral, pieces of coloured glass are used “to make the interim phases of a design interesting in themselves.” (Weber, 1962, p13) *St. Brigid*, (Fig.24)in Loughrea, has echoes of an etching, *The Word Within*. (Fig.25) These women meditate quietly on the Word of God, they look within themselves for the implications of His Word.

For us who are between spiritual and corporeal being the contrast between spirits and bodies is expressed in many pairs of opposites, such as luminous and dark, visible and unseen, inward and outward, high and low, transparent and opaque. In every case imagination is an intermediary reality between the two sides.....(Pye, 1991,p120)





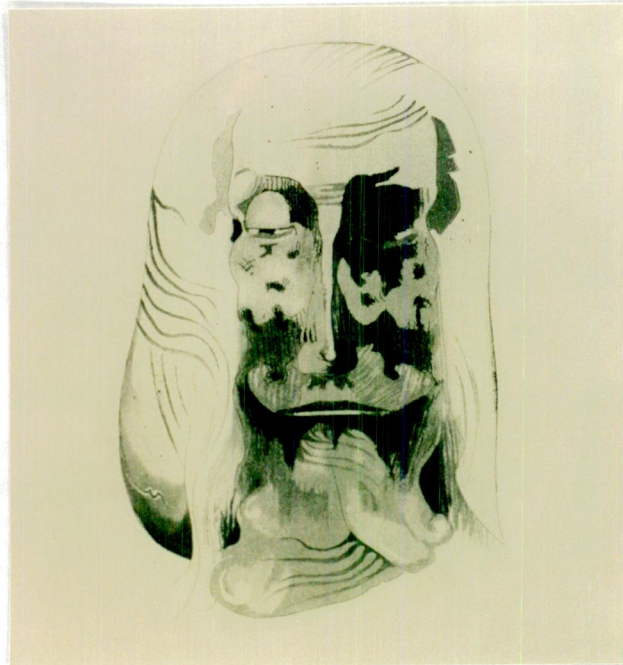
25. Pye, Patrick, *The Word Within*, etching

In *The Word Within* these contrasts are evident, the luminous and dark are mediated by such imagination. Compare the knowledge of God by imagination, by our 'gazing on the similitudes disclosed to us by God' with the light of the moon: "the rays of the moon are weak and allow us to gaze at it steadily. It is our delight in that luminosity that allows us so to contemplate her." On the other hand, the knowledge of God by intellect, the activity of the theologians, is compared to "the radiance of the sun which blinds us from what it reveals..... thus we have here a very complete description of the immanence and transcendence of God." (Pye, 1991, p120) Within Islam there is some conflict between the Muslim theologians, with their emphasis on God's transcendence, or 'incomparability', and the Sufis, who stress God's immanence or 'similarity'. Surely this dispute is very similar to the dispute within Christianity between those who view God through either 'negative', 'radical', 'proximate' or 'immanent' transcendence.

#### The Head of Christ

...he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him .  
he was despised and rejected by men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. (R.S.V., Isaiah, 53  
v.2,3)

The *Head of Christ* (Fig.26) was the most distressing image that I saw. The centre of the face is depicted in dark tones, the patchiness and awkward distancing of his method fragments the face of Christ. Pye described the only way of attaining the Christhead:



26. Pye, Patrick, *The Head of Christ*, (1) etching



27. Pye, Patrick, *The Head of Christ*, (2) etching



.....through enlisting the imagination in an interior vision....When at last the Christhead attains its emptiness of personality, of history and ourselves then we in turn are able to find in it the particular and secret gift that is vital to us. Not, of course the gift we want to see, but the gift the Spirit within us groans to see. That is the unearthly beauty by which the Head of Christ will hold us. Then the Christhead becomes a plenitude answering our inner life. (Pye, 1992, p67)

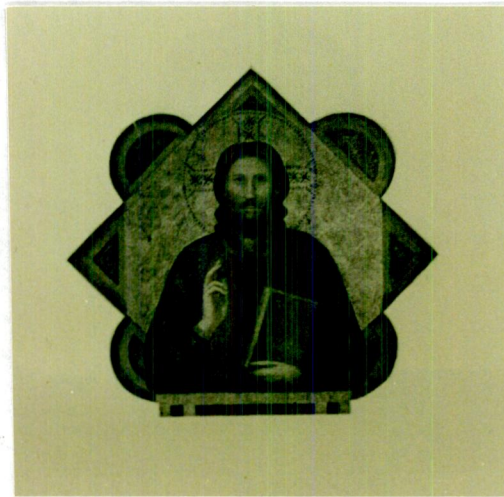
In his etching of this subject, one is confronted with a quiet, disturbing face. Christ peers at us from under barely-raised eyelids. His face, pock-marked, bears the cost of God's act of transcending humanity. The marks that Pye uses to bring unity to his paintings here fragment the surface of His face. Here is He about whom Isaiah wrote, the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief. An earlier etching of the same theme does not leave one quite so cold.(Fig.27) Perhaps this is because He does not look at us, but faces us, with closed eyes, and a darkness that completely shadows His face. Pye describes the medieval tradition as being guarded by the "pictorial autonomy of their space," that there is an inverse perspective with its focus on the soul of the spectator. (Pye,1992, p65) Christ's gaze seems to focus on our souls. When that gaze is broken we cease to be receptive to His transcendence.

Brian Fallon described this century as the Century of the Apocalypse. (Fallon, The Irish Times, 23 December,1992) In such an age, the suffering Christ comes to the fore. This image was, for me, the most moving, the most transcendent of all of Pye's work. It is also quite different to the bulk of his life's work. Is it necessary, in keeping with the approach of the medievals, and their 'humility before the Sacred Subject', to retain this distance of a cold narrative which seems to afflict Pye's work? Rivers criticised Pye for the small size of his figures in large open spaces. I think it would be possible to refrain from the subjectivity of much modern art, while creating a closer relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Here, in intimacy with His





28. Book of Kells,  
*The Head of Christ*

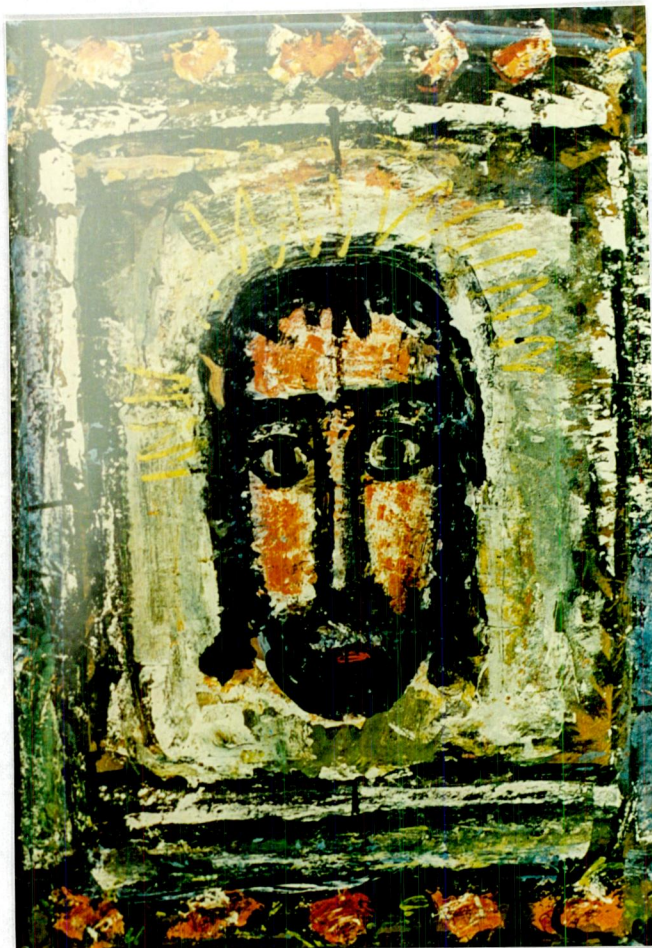


29. Giotto, *The Head of Christ*

suffering, we are receptive of Christ's gaze.

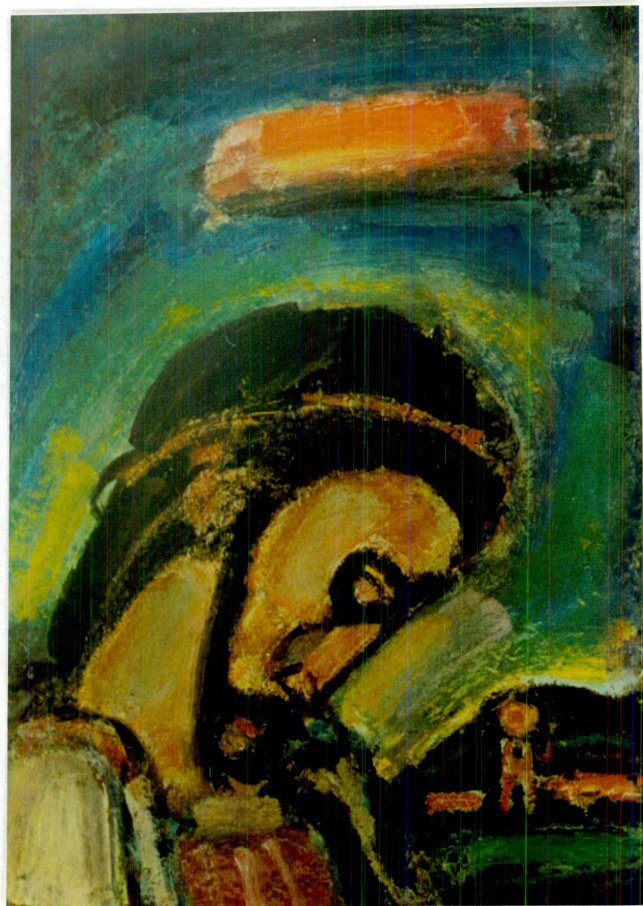
Perhaps by briefly comparing this image with those of other artists, we can begin to place Pye where he belongs within this tradition of Christian art. Kitzinger and Senior write of the medieval artist: "He removed Him as far as possible from the sphere of human experience to a spiritual world far above mankind and man's emotions.....They are intended as representations of the superhuman, the transcendental and the divine....." (Kitzinger and Senior, 1940,p.9) By His very representation in human form, however, we must also assume a reference to His Incarnation. They go on to describe how, in Byzantine art, there lived something of the "pagan belief in the magic power of images. A religious painting was not merely an illustration of the gospel text, but almost an incarnation of God himself." For this reason, the image changed very little over the years. Compare a *Head of Christ* found in the Book of Kells (Fig.28), of the late eighth century, with Giotto's image of Christ Blessing, not quite a *Head of Christ*, (Fig.29) but that gesture, "so common that it must have greeted the man on the street....a gesture of reserve." (Pye, 1980,p29) Compare these, then, with that of Rouault, who, like a poet of the Middle Ages, writing a *Divine Comedy* "depicted human suffering and misery, hope and beatitude, in a work so imbued with the sense of God's power..." . Here was an artist who, in the early twentieth century explored the "chasms of the Inferno.... the victims of the flesh and of lust for money, of knowledge, selfishness, and self-righteousness," later opposing these with the certainty of salvation. "Christ has vanquished death, and from this time onward Christ is ever present in Rouault's work." (Dorival,1974,p.5) *The Holy Face* of 1933 (Fig.30) is described by Dorival as one in which the artist

imparts to the bleeding, ravaged face of the Man of Sorrows the superhuman nobility of God in majesty as he appears in Byzantine and Romanesque art. Thanks to this return



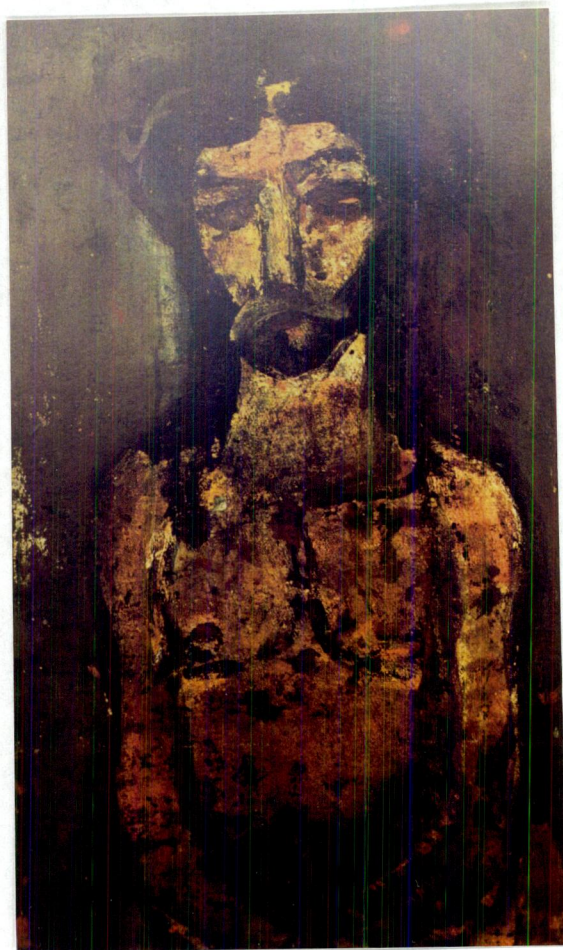
30. Rouault, George, *The Holy Face*





31. Rouault, George, *The Head of Christ*





32. Rouault, George, *Christ Mocked*

to the great Christian tradition the present work is both sacred and monumental....

Or look at the *Head of Christ*, 1937 (Fig.31), in which we are invited to relate to the person of Christ Himself, and thereby to recognise His suffering, as He bows His head, as if in prayer with His Father. It is interesting to note this similar treatment to the image of *Christ Mocked*, 1912 (Fig.32), a subject, that "absorbed Rouault throughout his life" as it did Pye. (Dorival, 1974, p34) Again we are brought close to this still, silent Christ."....like a lamb that is led to the slaughter...so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah, 53v.7)

Before the Crucifixion of this Man of Sorrows, the Judaic ban on sacred imagery kept the mind in "darkness and potentiality of knowing". This is comparable to the Muslim interdiction which referred to such naturalistic representations as could be required to function biologically at the Judgement Day. With the Crucifixion, "darkness is penetrated and an 'image' is given to the world, the image, no less, of the Father given in the Son." (Pye, 1991, p19) Coomaraswamy writes of how both Indian and Christian icons should be regarded as diagrams, expressing certain ideas, not as the likeness of anything on earth. The formal element in Indian art represents a purely mental activity. Therefore India has developed a very specialized technique of vision. The icon-maker, by Yoga, eliminates the distracting influences of fugitive emotions and creature images, self-willing and self-thinking, then visualizes the form of the angel or aspect of God, which is described in a canonical prescription. (Coomaraswamy, 1956, p.5) The mind draws this form to itself, as though from a great distance, ultimately from heaven, where the types of art exist in formal operation. For Christian iconographers, the Church announced in the Trullan Council of 691 AD that

certain holy images have the image of a lamb, at which is pointing the finger of the Forerunner. This image is taken as the

image of grace, representing the true Lamb, Christ our God, whom the law foreshadowed. Thus accepting with love the ancient images and shadows as prefigurations and symbols of truth transmitted to the Church, we prefer grace and truth, receiving it as the fulfilment of the law. Thus in order to make plain this fulfillment for all to see, if only by means of pictures, we ordain that from henceforth icons should represent, instead of the lamb of old, the human image of the Lamb, Who has taken upon himself the sins of the world, Christ our God (Trullan Council, 681, A.D.)

Iconographers were required to be rigorously spiritually disciplined, in order to be sensitive to the layers of meaning in the Scriptures- the literal, the analogical and the spiritual .

Let us return to Pye's *Head of Christ* , and bear this image in mind as the artist asks what is the guiding principle for the iconographer in attaining the 'likeness' of Christ.

Christ, the 'last Adam', showed himself as the archetype of the first man, "in the abasement of his redemptive work he now takes on the likeness of the fallen human nature, which is an 'unlikeness' belonging to the aspect of the 'Servant', of the 'Man of Sorrows'." (Pye, 1991, p20) Christ, therefore, unites two aspects of 'likeness' in his earthly life: that of glorious likeness and that of kenotic<sup>4</sup> unlikeness. Form of God in united with form of Servant, and the former is dissimulated by the latter for outward eyes.

---

<sup>4</sup>Greek: *Kenosis* = self- emptying.



## Conclusion

In a report following the first International Forum of the Arts which took place in Sardinia, the 'ingredients of a creative experience' were described as including processes of 'entering into a void and becoming void so that one can function as an instrument. The greatest obstacle to this is ego. It blocks creativity. One way to remove it is to realise that there is no such thing as an original thought. When there is humility and cleanliness within, one can pick ideas up from the cosmos.'

There are echoes here again of the very necessary balance between considering God's transcendence and his immanence, i.e. immanent transcendence, and likewise the balance between 'abstraction' and 'representation'. "Our inner life has been left threadbare", writes Pye, because in this age God has been "interiorized to infinitesimal dimensions, while all the time the ancient symbols have been whittled away by 'explanation' .....By insisting too literally on God's transcendence we have reaped a terrible rebellion in our own immanence which no longer finds the stepping stones in the created world back to its Creator."(Pye, 1991, p.121)

Burckhart refers to Sedlmayr's book, The Loss of the Centre, in which the author describes how the decadence of Christian art is the decadence of man. I feel it helpful to cite this whole section, as it encompasses both issues of

humility before the transcendent, and truth in faithfulness to an incarnate deity.

.....the image of God made man,transmitted by medieval art, is succeeded by the image of autonomous man, of man glorifying himself, in the art of the Renaissance.This illusory autonomy implies from the first the 'loss of the centre'....thereafter the image of man decomposes;first it is replaced, so far as dignity is concerned, by other aspects of nature, and then it is progressively destroyed; its systematic negation and disfigurement is the goal of modern art.

.....Just as the Incarnation of the Word has its corollary in the supreme sacrifice, and as the 'imitation of Christ' is not conceivable without asceticism, so the representation of the Man-God demands a humility in the means employed, that is to say , an emphasis on their remoteness from the Divine model.

There is thus no Christian art without a certain degree of 'abstraction', if indeed it be permissible to use so equivocal a term to designate that which really constitutes the 'concrete' character, the 'spiritual realism', of sacred art. In brief: if Christian art were entirely abstract it would not bear witness to the Incarnation of the Word; if it were naturalistic, it would belie the Divine nature of that Incarnation. (Burckhart, 1967,p.148 )

This passage, written also within the context of the idea of a proximately transcendent God embraces my arguments for a freedom instigated by a faithfulness and service to a Deity, and the necessity for humility in that approach, avoiding both a subjectification of the Subject and a fragmentation of language.

Patrick Pye's iconography is rooted in this tradition which balances such abstraction with naturalism. He does not see the representation of Christian subject matter and of still lives or interiors as mutually exclusive concerns. He reaches to the reality behind the object itself, and so the direction of line and the colour mean more than the subject matter itself. Instead, "the subject is implicit in all his thought and, like the theme of a meditation, it moves from

one connotation to another, each illumines an aspect of the original theme and comes back to it.”(Burckhart, 1967, p.149) Where Pye is at his most ‘narrative’ however, I think he succeeds least in this balance. His *Head of Christ*, his *Word Within, Clayware and Cloth*, all bear witness to both the spiritual and the physical realism of the Incarnate God, as do the stained glass *Madonna and Child*, or *St. Brigid*. Whereas I found his *St Michael*, or *Legend* to be somewhat remote. In each of these last two the emphasis seems to be on the narration of a particular event passed down through the ages, and as a story teller, the artist hopes, it seems, to capture more than just a moment of this. I feel that some simplicity is lost in the story being told, and while often, the larger, foreground figure is employed to lead us into a relation to the events, there is a much greater strength in those apparently less ambitious meditations on a single figure, or a still life. The *Head of Christ* encompasses both that simplicity, and the huge history of ‘God become man’. Through it we gain both proximate and immanent transcendence, without losing the freedom of seeking the Deity within ourselves.

Pye is not seeking an emotional, dramatic response. The icon’s form is derived from a spiritual vision or understanding of the universe, and it is a synthesis of matter transformed by spirit.

Tradition associates the first icon with Christ himself. Agbar, King of Edessa, afflicted with leprosy, heard that Christ could restore him to health. He set his ambassador, Ananias to Palestine, in order to find Christ and return with Him. As Christ was addressing the crowd, Ananias began to sketch the face of Christ. Our Lord, aware of the other’s efforts, soaked a piece of linen in water, and, pressing it firmly to his face, gave it to Ananias. Christ’s features were clearly imprinted on it. Stuart writes of how this “image presupposes the imaged just as a shadow denotes the presence of the figure that casts it.”



(Stuart, 1975, p.31)

When the Israelites made an image of God in the form of a bull, they failed to encompass all his characteristics. But the image of Christ sent to Agbar was not merely the product of the artist's imagination. It was an authentic portrait, it revealed the essence of Christ's nature. On the one image was Christ, the wise-judge, comforter, man-God and Saviour, the same eternally. Christ himself said "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

The Christian iconographer can only hope to put himself to one side, and to find his/her freedom in reflecting this Christ, the incarnation of the transcendent God

## Bibliography

- BARASCHE, Moshe, Giotto and the Language of Gesture, Great Britain, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- BARZUN, Jaques, The Use and Abuse of Art, U.S.A., Princeton University Press, 1973
- BROWN, Frank Burch, Religious Aesthetics, London, The Macmillan Press, 1990.
- BURCKHARDT, Titus, Sacred Art in East and West, Great Britain, Perennial Books Ltd., 1967.
- COOMARASWAMY, Ananda K., The Transformation of Art in Nature, New York, Dover Publications, 1956.
- DORIVAL, Bernard, G. Rouault, Haus der Kunst, Munich and City Art Gallery, Manchester, 1974.
- FALLON, Brian, "Beyond Kitsch: religious art today", in The Irish Times, 23rd December, 1992.
- FERGUSON, George, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971.
- FULLER, Peter, Images of God, London, The Hogarth Press, 1985
- HUYGHE, Rene, Byzantine and Medieval Art, Great Britain, Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1968.





- JENCKS, Charles (Ed.), The Post-Modern Reader, London, Academy Editions, 1992.
- JUNG, Carl, Man and His Symbols, London, Aldus Books, 1964.
- KITZINGER, Ernst and SENIOR, Elizabeth Portraits of Christ, Great Britain, King Penguin Books, 1940.
- KUNG, Hans, Christianity and Other World Religions, London, Fount, 1987.
- MARITAIN, Jaques, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, Washington, Princeton University Press, 1981.
- MURDOCH, Iris, The Sovereignty of Good, Routledge, 1970.
- OTTO, Rudolf, The Idea of the Holy, New York, Oxford University Press, 1969.
- PYE, Patrick, Apples and Angels, Dublin, Veritas Publications, 1980.
- PYE, Patrick, Does Art Have Any Meaning?, Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1962.
- PYE, Patrick, "The Emptiness of the Image", in Studies, Winter, 1992
- PYE, Patrick, The Time Gatherer, El Greco and the Sacred Theme, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1991.
- RIVERS, Elizabeth, "Patrick Pye", in The Dubliner, n.d.
- REVISED STANDARD VERSION, The Holy Bible, U.S.A., A.J. Holman Company, 1962.



- RUSKIN, John, The Stones of Venice, New York, Da Capo Press, 1960.
- SHARP, William (ed.), Herbert's Poems, London, Walter Scott, 1889.
- STUART, John, Ikons, London, Faber and Faber, 1975.
- WEBER, "Patrick Pye", in Forgnan, Journal of the Building Centre, Vol 1, No5, Dublin, May 1962.



