

THE ARTS OF MANKIND

*EDITED BY ANDRÉ MALRAUX
AND ANDRÉ PARROT*

EUROPE IN THE DARK AGES



JEAN HUBERT
JEAN PORCHER • W.F. VOLBACH

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BY STUART GILBERT AND JAMES EMMONS

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HOMAGE TO JEAN PORCHER

In the course of such an immense enterprise as 'The Arts of Mankind,' it was but to be expected that one or another of the participants should not live to see it through. But there is an especial poignancy when death leaves a gap in an unfinished task. Hence the shock for all of us when, on April 26, 1966, we learned of the death of Jean Porcher, honorary Chief Curator of the Cabinet des Manuscrits in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and joint author of the two volumes in our series dealing with the Merovingians and the Carolingians.

Jean Porcher was one of the most likable of men. Small, sprightly, with sparkling eyes and an alert expression, he had a frankly optimistic nature, an infectious cheerfulness. Speaking of him, one of his friends quoted his own words to remind us that he sprang from that Norman race of men, 'inquisitive, aggressive, impetuous yet level-headed, who can affirm and deny in the same breath so as the better to encompass the truth of the matter.' An alumnus of the Ecole des Chartes, exceptionally gifted, speaking several languages (including Russian), he lived contentedly among his books and manuscripts. No one could have been better qualified to deal with an age that he knew by heart, that of the great illuminated manuscripts. He had organized three exhibitions of them (1954, 1955, 1958) which Malraux described as 'a cultural landmark of the present century' since, thanks to them, 'the amazing painting of the centuries without painting at long last entered history.'

After his retirement in 1962, Jean Porcher worked harder than ever. Renowned at home and abroad, his services were in constant demand. For this reason, he was frequently invited to Dumbarton Oaks. None of us suspected that he was already suffering from an incurable disease. Some months later, Jean Porcher was irremediably lost. Pendent opera interrupta. But there could be no question of resigning ourselves to this tragic frustration of our hopes. The work begun by him has been brought to completion. The chapters entirely written by his hand remain a moving memorial to the author, a testimony to a dedicated faith in his calling, and a scholarly enthusiasm that never faltered, even when he knew the end was near.

ANDRÉ PARROT

June 1967



Introduction

GREEK, then Roman antiquity had built up through the ages a civilization centering on and ancillary to man and his terrestrial existence, after which he led a life that was but half alive, as a drifting shade, harmless or malevolent as the case might be, never at rest, exiled from light and all the joys of living. Like the civilization itself, its art was dominated by man and his environment; it represented him existing in space, as he really is—if perceptible appearances are envisaged as the sole reality and the function of art is to give an illusion of them. Even the gods of antiquity have human forms, they share man's passions and foibles, his virtues and his vices; even ideas and abstractions were personified by art. In virtue of an underlying equilibrium, whose laws the artist sought to elicit, the forms of nature reflected the physical and moral harmony of a universe made to man's measure, and beauty was a product of these laws.

The passing of the ancient world put a stop to this art, but this ending did not come abruptly. Between its premonitory signs and the time (towards the fifth century) when a new Europe came to birth, there was a long interval, marked by cataclysmic upheavals. The Roman Empire fell to pieces under the onslaughts of the barbarians who, from the second half of the third century on, had begun to overrun its frontiers and establish themselves in the West, where they became the seminal centres of our modern nations. For this break-up of a civilization peerless of its kind, Rome herself was partly to blame, politically, to begin with, as a result of the autocratic nature of the central government. In an earlier age the Roman citizen had conquered the world; he lost it by tamely submitting to the dictatorial rule of upstarts and demagogues less and less qualified to hold for long the reins of power. The imperial economy was unable to stand up against this regime and to meet the cost of constant wars beyond the frontiers. None the less, so lasting was the imprint that Greco-Roman antiquity had made on the mentality of Europe that western man never could cease looking back to it with a nostalgic yearning; in times of doubt and trouble,

he turned invariably to antiquity, as the source of all the spiritual values that give life a meaning. These periodical returns to the past are usually described as 'renascences.' They took a number of different forms and the pages that follow are devoted to one of them, the Carolingian renaissance of the ninth century and the events leading up to it.

But if classical antiquity in its decline left this abiding imprint, the reason was that it appealed even more to the soul than to the mind. Imbued at an early hour with the spirit of the mystical religions of the East, which freed it from a sterile materialism, it had embraced Christianity in the fourth century and in so doing opened to man the portals of eternity. Henceforth Rome was inseparable from Christ, Roman art equaled Christian art.

After the Edict of Milan which, in February 313, set its seal on the union of Church and State, Constantine transferred the capital to Byzantium in the eastern Mediterranean. Before his death he divided the Empire between his sons, Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius, who succeeded him in 337. The early period of this divided Empire was marked by the rivalry between the new rulers. But a much more serious peril than these domestic feuds menaced the safety of the whole Empire. As far back as 276 Franks and Alamanni had crossed the Rhine, invaded Roman Gaul and established themselves in the north-east of the province as far as Autun. Constans and, after him, Valentinian, while striving to contain them in Gaul and Brittany, had to defend the Danube frontier against the Sarmatians (354-375).

In 375, brushing aside the Ostrogoths, the Huns began a new advance. Three years later (August 9, 378) a horde of western Goths (Visigoths), who had swept down across the Danube, utterly defeated the Romans at Adrianople. From the reign of Theodosius (379-395) on, began a gradual infiltration of barbarians into the Roman army, even into the imperial administration, which was ready now to compromise with them, thus postponing its final downfall. The definitive settlement of barbarians in the West took place in the fifth century.

While the Vandals and their allies, the Suevi, crossed the Rhine in December 406, invaded Gaul, then Spain, and finally conquered Roman Africa in 429-439, Alaric's Visigoths, after ravaging the East of the Empire, launched an attack (in 401) on the West. Despite the stout resistance put up by Stilicho, Honorius' 'captain-general', the Goths entered Rome on August 24, 410, and sacked it—though as Christians (if Arians) they spared the churches. Next, by way of Aquitaine, under the command of Athaulf (Alaric's brother-in-law), they invaded Spain. In 455 Rome was pillaged once again, this time by the Vandals, who under the leadership of Genseric had established themselves in Africa. Now the barbarians became the effective rulers of the West: when on August 23, 476, the Herule chief Odoacer, commander of the imperial troops, deposed the child-king Romulus Augustulus, the Empire of the West came to an end.

After defeating Odoacer and capturing Milan (in 493), the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, made Ravenna his chief place of residence, under the nominal authority of the Emperor of the East. Theodoric died in 526, and thanks to the enterprise of Justinian (527-565), the sixth century was the age of the Byzantine reconquest, an age of alternating peace and war. Justinian's famous general, Belisarius, invaded Africa, wiped 'Vandalia' off the roll of nations in a brief campaign, then turned to Italy, entering Rome in 536. After recapturing part of Italy, the Gothic king Totila was defeated and slain by Narses, Belisarius' successor, in 552. The whole of Italy was reunited under Byzantine rule, and at about the same time Justinian turned his attention to Spain. The Mediterranean was once again a Roman sea. Byzantium had partly restored the cohesion of the old Empire, and here we have perhaps one of the causes of the revival of Byzantine influence and the classical tradition which characterized the seventh century throughout the western world. Justinian had surrendered transalpine Gaul to the Franks. In Great Britain Germanic peoples (Frisians, Angles, Saxons, Jutes), all of them heathens, had, in the middle of the fifth century, invaded and settled in the South and East of the old Roman province. Christianity was introduced into these regions by missionaries dispatched first from Rome, then from Ireland, in the first half of the seventh century. Justinian died in 565 and three years later a new band of invaders, the Lombards, poured into Italy. After taking Milan in 569, they occupied the whole interior of the country, and there installed a string of duchies, most important of which were Spoleto in the north and Benevento to the south of Rome. After a relatively tranquil period lasting over a century, the Lombards under their king Liutprand resumed their victorious advance. When Ravenna fell to them in 751, the East had no longer any foothold in Italy, and the sole representative of the Empire in the peninsula was the Pope. Such was the situation in the West at the beginning of the second half of the eighth century when, hard pressed by the Lombards, Pope Stephen II appealed for aid (in 753) to Pepin, King of the Franks, father of Charlemagne.

The West had been thoroughly transformed by these upheavals and the only refuge for what survived of the ancient Empire was in the eastern provinces, where the towns had kept intact their schools, their administration and their artists' workshops. This explains why the cultural and artistic idiosyncrasies of the eastern regions enjoyed a wide diffusion in the lands of the West, then undergoing a disastrous economic crisis: a diffusion that was further promoted by successive invasions of the Mediterranean and African East, first by the Persians, then by the Arabs (605-678). But this final débacle of Roman power should not make us overlook those glorious centuries when the might of Roman arms had converted the Mediterranean into a Latin sea; the moral unity of the Empire was fated to outlast for many years the political dismemberment of the western world. But now that world was to be shaken by cataclysms—this time of a religious order.

Only a few years after its destiny had become tied up with that of the Roman Empire, the Church embarked (round about 318) on the momentous doctrinal

controversy due to the rise of Arianism. Its struggles with the heresy of Arius, complicated by the need to combat the Donatist schism, were followed in the early fifth century by the dispute which led to the condemnation of Nestorius by the council of Ephesus in 431. Next came the heresy of Eutyches, that of the Monothelites and, last and most serious in its impact on art, that of the iconoclasts (image-breakers) which lasted for over a century, from 726 to 843. The germinal centre of these controversies was Constantinople, in the very palace of the monarch on whom the whole life of the State depended. Thus, from its earliest days, the eastern sector of the Empire was deeply involved in the most arduous, most abstract theological disputations. This fact, of capital importance, partly accounts for the progressive transformation of art, in which from now on the Church was to play a dominant role. It was in the first decade of this, the fourth century, that the Greek scholar Porphyry died in Rome; he had been the commentator on the *Enneads* of the Neoplatonist Plotinus, and author of the *Introduction to the Categories of Aristotle*, a passage in which gave rise to the controversy as to the nature of Universals which so greatly preoccupied medieval scholars.

Do ideas exist *ante rem*, independently of the mind, or are they its creations, mere collocations of words? Do we live in the midst of transient appearances, mere reflections of a reality that underlies their diverse aspects? The art of the Church—all art—took sides and opted to be 'realist' in the philosophical sense of the term, as was to be the art of the Early Middle Ages, including that of the Carolingians, despite their efforts to avoid this. Carolingian art, as we shall see, spelt the triumph of abstraction, hints of which were visible early in the century of Constantine and Theodosius. Abstraction steadily gained ground in the next century, and all tokens of earthly life were gradually drained away from the painted and carved images, of which until now that life had been the pretext and mainstay.

The notion of space tends to die out and by the same token that of relief. Forms are flattened, isolated, and are no longer organized in relation to each other on a plane created and demarcated by our horizon-line, nor do they go to compose pictures peopled with figures like those we see in daily life. Devoid of weight and substance, these forms seem to have broken contact with the ground; they float up and hover one above the other, reduced to the condition of signs—rather like writing on a wall or on the pages of a manuscript. Signs of beings and things whose real nature is garbled by the appearances that meet the eye, they can be grasped as they truly are only by the thinking mind. In these signs it is the message alone that matters, 'vain' appearances cease to count, the artist makes no effort to represent depth or any sort of empty space, and he soon becomes incapable of doing so. Each scene, however crowded or intricate, is depicted on the frontal plane exclusively: all that lies behind is shown on top of the main scene or outlined in an independent row, the upper figures signifying a rearward, the lower, a forward, position. In short the third dimension is ignored completely.

Images thus delivered from their material context are particularly suitable for the representation of divine beings. Representations of this kind naturally bulked large in a milieu in which the Church, theological problems and religious ceremonies were the prime concern. But these sacred figures were also differentiated from the others by their immobility; for movement pertains to the world of men, where all is in a state of flux, change and decay, and will so continue till the end of time—a world of generation and corruption. Whereas Heaven and its denizens are eternal and unmoving. No trace of emotion ruffles the faces of God, the Virgin and the saints, and this attitude of superb aloofness also befitted certain sacred personages such as the emperor. To render this demeanour nothing could have been more appropriate than the use of a single plane, suppressing space and the movement it generates. That stalwart adversary of the Monothelite heresy, St. Maximus the Confessor, spiritual leader of Greek orthodoxy, who died in 662, voiced the opinion of the contemporary theologians, an opinion no less operative in the domain of art than in the thought of his contemporaries, and harmonizing with the philosophic and cosmographic views of the age. 'Godhead is motionless at every point and therefore immune from any outside interference, no matter what its source. How, indeed, could anything mundane climb to that high, closed tower from which God contemplates the universe? His peace is unperturbable, His stability unshakable, safeguarded by the serenity of His being.'

There was no novelty in this dictum; for a long while, as a result of contacts with the religious thought of the East, ancient art had taken to assigning to the immortals and to heroes a gaze, a posture, even a stature, in keeping with their supremacy over ordinary mortals and their supramundane functions. But what had been, so far, only a vague tendency, now became the rule; the narrative genre was henceforth confronted, sometimes in one and the same scene, and by the hand of the same artist, with the hieratic genre, which soon imposed its formulas on art at large. Those aspects of the perceptible, concrete world in which the artist saw but a coarse reflection of the sacred were blotted out. There is no question that this evolution was speeded up by the current theological controversies, for art is necessarily bound up with its environment and the spirit of the age; but they did not give rise to it, there had long been premonitory signs of this change. To attribute it to the barbarian invasions would be a mistake, for it much preceded them. Nonetheless, the foreigners who, after taking over the reins of power, became the new patrons, often too the practitioners, of art, did much to develop it, in virtue of their decorative instinct, essentially coloristic and hostile to any effects of relief. In promoting these pictorial methods, the Church authorities adapted to their own ends the Bible imagery which had developed in the holy places of Palestine, its natural and traditional setting, and made it capable of embodying constant allusions to the Christian's hopes of eternal life in the Other World.

The generalization of these methods, which took place in or about the fifth century, is a fact far more significant than the technical degeneration to which it tended (incidentally) to give rise. Severed from its terrestrial links and oriented

towards the divine, the art of the West was henceforth, with alternating periods of regression and advance, to restore slowly and tentatively the broken links and to retrieve a foothold, at the human level, in man's life on earth. This process took full effect only in the fifteenth century, the century of humanism when, after a thousand years, medievalism had run its course and men's eyes were opened to a new vision of the world.

Antiquity did not die out abruptly. Not only did its towns and palaces, their furniture and decorations, silent witnesses of its achievements, survive, but there still lived men cast in its mould and whole families who treasured memories of the splendid unity of the Roman world. As late as 416 one of their poets, Rutilius Namatianus, voiced this nostalgic yearning when, acclaiming Rome, he wrote, *Fecisti patriam diversis gentibus unam*: 'Thou didst make for diverse peoples a single fatherland.' Though the barbarians could not share the regrets of a Gallo-Roman, they could admire the culture of these men amongst whom they now lived and feel a very real respect for the material vestiges bequeathed by that bygone culture. This admiration and respect for the Roman past were never to die out. In the Carolingian age and the age leading up to it, we are on the threshold of a long period of history, that of the making and shaping of modern Europe. We are witnessing a birth, our birth, in which two radically different mentalities participated, two 'families' of thought with whose unequal imprint we are still marked, token of a deep-seated cleavage that many centuries were hard put to it to efface. Art, letters, even ways of thinking were long to oscillate between two heritages, constantly pitted against each other and striving towards an equilibrium, but always losing it again once it had been precariously achieved.

That equilibrium was harder to achieve in this early phase, when the conflict between the two trends had an instancy that time was to abate, than in any other; but also in some ways easier, in view of the fact that classical antiquity was still an abiding presence, close at hand, always ready to assert its high prerogative, a claim insisted on, compulsive, as it was never again to be in afteryears.

PART ONE

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