

A critique of the paintings in the MCCMCA by Francis Hoyland

1. Norman Adams - Christ's Entry into Jerusalem

'I can trace everything I have done back to a source of inspiration in nature' writes Norman Adams. But it seems to me that there is another source – art: particularly that of Ensor and Klee. And I found myself thinking of Maurice Denis's definition of a painting as 'a flat surface in which colours are arranged in a certain order'; while I was looking at this piece. I suppose one of the reasons I find it delightful is that I can empathise with the way it is done. 'What fun' I find myself thinking, 'to draw with a relaxed line on good paper and then fill it in with artists quality water colour. My fingers itch to share in this delight! But in order to get the colours to 'sit down' together like this one would have to be a bit of a master and to get them to recede and advance as they do is not easy, nor is it easy to produce continuously inventive imagery. Look, for instance at the role of the sunflower in the right foreground; it relates to other sunflowers and to the sun on the flag and may even refer to the Son of God as well.

The painting is divided into separate areas - the central, bright and square, holds the principal drama - it is surrounded by a hedge of russet and green shapes, which is criss-crossed in a way that may refer to the coming crown of thorns.

Only two figures inhabit this marginal area - an ancient man who seems to be led towards the principal event by the little girl in red and, top left, a weeping female head which must be Our Lord's mother. Christ is yellow light and epitomises the radiance present in the colour of the whole. He processes along a mainly green strip or rectangle. He moves towards a white cross on a dark flag - a red cross and a Union Jack hang behind him. Since these crosses occur on flags, perhaps they make reference to the fact that Our Lord was slain as a deliberate act of state, as well as to the horrors that nationalism can produce!

A pale, blue shape like an inverted 'L' frames part of the central rectangle letting in cool air. This finds echoes in other blue areas; the lady behind the donkey's head, for instance. Squares, crosses and diagonals of squares crop up everywhere. The relationships between them is often emphasised by colour.

The pictorial language used is both subtle and supple. Within the central square something like a traditional space is set up. The children and dogs in the foreground are definitely in front of Our Lord and the dark figures processing before him. And they, too, are in front of the man looking out of the window. The flags also seem to be hanging within a recognisable volume of air. However, round the edges of the central square, space gives way to a loosely arranged pattern of diamond shapes - interspersed with leaves that may stand for palm branches as well as the crown of thorns.

The sunflowers shout "hosanna" with the children in the foreground - indeed two of the central group have, subliminal sunflowers printed on them. I wonder if the two dark figures are the Pharisees who asked Our Lord to stop the children praising him.

I have tried to hint at some of the wealth of this beautiful painting and I am sure that you can discover more. But what makes it work so well?

First the continual interaction between a realised space and the lovely pattern of the picture surface, which is particularly clearly shown by the relation between the central square and its surround, takes our fancy and holds our interest. This happens everywhere - is it flat or is it three-dimensional? The answer is clearly that it is both, and somewhere within this playful, pictorial activity and within the deceptively 'easy' and seemingly relaxed pencil lines that seem to have come first, and the act of colouring, the Holy Spirit has found a place. This Spirit, that Milton described as the one who 'Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss and made it pregnant', can, of course, 'blow where he listeth' and all an artist can do is to construct a nest by a process of child-like play and hope that the Holy Spirit will find it comfortable.

I don't know exactly what kind of faith Norman Adams professes, but he certainly is concerned with a feeling of 'rightness' or pictorial truth - and since Our Lord is Truth, as far as art is concerned, that will do.