A "Jesuit Style" in Art?

by D. G. BARRETT, S.J.

WHAT the Jesuits have contributed by their own hands to the visual arts is quickly told. A priest, Fr Castiglione, and a brother, Fra Pozzo, hold an indisputable place in the history of art. Fr Castiglione is the only European to be accepted by the Chinese as a distinguished painter in the Chinese manner. Fra Pozzo had an important influence on Northern Italian and rococo church decoration. The names of a large number of competent but not very gifted Jesuit architects and painters may find their way into footnotes in art histories. Beyond that: nothing.

But in the matter of indirect contribution by patronage and inspiration the Jesuits have been accorded a flatteringly important influence in the development of European art. They are credited with inspiring and fostering the taste of the Counter Reformation. What more natural—certain art historians have reasoned—than that the Jesuits who had saved the Church from the Reformation should form the taste of the Church they had saved? Since they had a theology, a spirituality, a system of education, why not a style of their own?

This style, in the judgment of those who father it on the Jesuits, is not a matter for congratulation. It is a debased art form which an earlier age had christened baroque or grotesque (the term ‘Jesuit Style’ was found for it by the German Hand-Lexicon des Allgemeinen Wissen, 1878). It is characterized by a ‘futile indulgence of the flesh,’ 1 aggressively answering the ascetic remonstrance of the Reformation by a still further concession to the mundane senses. 2 One author who marvelled that the Jesuits adopted this style (‘there is nothing Jesuitical about it’) adds that ‘as the Jesuits embodied resistance to austerity in religion, so the Baroque style was a revolt against the same qualities in later pedantic Renaissance art.’ 3

These authors like to compare this ‘Jesuit style’ unfavourably with the Catholic art of the Middle Ages. ‘We are agreeing with that great Catholic, St Bernard’, writes Herbert Read, ‘St Bernard reacted against similar tendencies in the art of the twelfth century.’ And the French critic, Taine—who seems to have been the first to draw attention to Jesuit taste—having praised Gothic art with its ‘musings, splendid and

1 Herbert Read in The Listener, 24 November 1955.
sad’, proceeds, ‘from the beginning of that epoch [the Counter Reformation] religious experience changed, the Jesuits were in the ascendant . . . Religion became mundane, she wished to please, she arranged her churches like drawing rooms.’

Why, it may be asked, did the Jesuits make such extravagant appeals to the senses? To win cheap popularity for the Counter Reformation, some would say; according to others, to produce that ecstasy of the senses, which they believe to be the object of the Spiritual Exercises. The purpose of the Spiritual Exercises, says Professor Wittkower, is to produce ‘a vivid apprehension of any given subject for meditation by an extremely vivid appeal to the senses . . . It is through emotional identification with the mood symbolized in a figure that the faithful are led to submit to the ethos of the triumphant Counter Reformation.’

To anyone familiar with the Spiritual Exercises or with the history and spirit of the Jesuits and their contribution to the Counter Reformation this is all so much confusion and prejudice. Indeed, were these ideas not so widespread, did they not contain a certain element of truth which gives them plausibility, they might well be passed over in silence. But unfortunately they are commonplaces among non-Catholic and even Catholic authors. For this reason it might be worth while to consider the Jesuit attitude to art in the early years of the Society and its influence, if any, on the art of the Counter Reformation.

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First, the official attitude. Richardson and Corfiato in their work on architecture make this remarkable statement: ‘from the fact that the Catholic German States nearest to Italy were the first to encourage this new form of plastic design [baroque] can be inferred the adoption of this style by the Jesuits as an official expression for their building.’ Whatever may be made of the logic of this statement, it certainly contradicts the documentary evidence. For example in De Ratione Aedificiorum (decree 113) we read: ‘Concerning churches, however, nothing was said. This seemed rather a matter for further consideration’. A reply to the Provincial Congregations of France when they petitioned a uniform building plan for the Society is more explicit: ‘This postulate has often been addressed to Rome and a means of answering it has been sought, but the matter presented serious difficulties because of the extreme diversity of places. The ratio domiciliorum cannot offer a single plan, each house must find the plan best suited to it’.

Plans of all projected buildings had to be submitted to Rome. The comments of the Roman authorities are concerned with practical not

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1 *Voyage en Italie*, 1896, p. 279.
2 Introduction to Phaidon Bernini, 1955.
3 *The Art of Architecture*, p. 112.
with aesthetic aspects of the plan. The criterion was: are the buildings suitable for the ministry of the Society? and are they economical? Provided that a church could hold a large congregation and that the congregation could see the altar and hear the preacher, provided also that there were sufficient side-chapels and confessionals, and that it could be built at proportionately small expense, the authorities were satisfied. When a church was being planned for Paris, the General suggested that it should be like the Gesù. In style? No—in size, because it would have to cope with the large congregations of a capital.

Decoration was to be cut to a minimum to save expense, unless there were rich benefactors to pay for it. Even then anything that savoured of luxury was to be avoided. St Francis Borgia was particularly insistent on this point and had the original design for the façade of the Gesù discarded in favour of a plainer and cheaper one.

Sufficient has been said to show that the Roman authorities had no official aesthetic interest in architecture. Nor had the local superiors who chose the architects. A study of Jesuit architecture in any country of Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will show this. (Studies of the churches in Spain, Germany and the Netherlands were made by Fr J. Braun, and a recent Sorbonne thesis by P. Moisy—quoted in an article in Études, December 1955, to which the present writer is indebted—covers France.) In these countries the dominant Jesuit church architecture until 1620 was, strange to say, gothic. From 1620 churches in the Renaissance or Italian style were introduced. Towards the end of the century these were decorated in the baroque style and a few, surprisingly few, original baroque churches built. And as these churches followed the style of the time, so they followed the modifications of style proper to each country and were quite unlike Jesuit churches in other countries. Even within one country we do not find uniformity. In France for example, about 1620, Jesuit churches were built according to three distinct plans: the central (oval or greek cross), 'single nave' and a combination of these two (a shallow latin cross).

This absence of preference for a distinctive and uniform style, the desire to conform to the usages of time and country—as befitted religious whose dress and manner of life was to resemble that of the local clergy—is manifest in their use of the gothic. In France and in the Low Countries the Jesuits were regarded as the last and staunchest supporters of gothic. Eight French Jesuit churches were either pure gothic or gothic with discreet classical motifs. The chapel of Valenciennes, now regarded as an extreme example of 'Jesuit style', was originally gothic and was not decorated in 'Jesuit style' until 1775—two years after the suppression of the Society. The work of restoring the Cathedral of Orleans was en-

1 Fr Braun's works, published by Herder, 1907–15, have not been superseded.
trusted to the Jesuit architect, Fr Martellange, on account of his great understanding of gothic.

So much for the notion that the Jesuits seized on a style and made it their own as an official art form. If, therefore, we find that one plan was more often employed in Jesuit churches than any other, this does not argue an aesthetic preference or desire for distinction or uniformity. The reason is entirely practical as will appear from a study of the Gesù, the most important example, though not the prototype of this form of church architecture. The Gesù as designed by Vignola had a wide nave with side-chapels but no aisles, shallow transepts and apse, a ceiling of barrel-vaulting and a dome at the intersection of nave and transepts. This type of building had a long history. As early as the thirteenth century in Northern Italy and a little later in Southern France, Spain and Germany, the Franciscans and Dominicans substituted the long narrow gothic nave and aisles for a short, broad aisleless nave with side-chapels between the buttresses. The most spectacular achievement in this type of architecture is to be found in Spain in Catalonia, where the Cathedral of Gerona is spanned by a gothic arch 73 feet in width.

The purpose of these churches was to enable a large congregation to hear the preacher and attend Mass without having their view obstructed by pillars. This was precisely what the Jesuits asked of their church. It is significant that St Francis Borgia, the General under whom the Gesù was built, had been Governor of Catalonia for seven years and that from his entrance into the Society he had been anxious to see a large Jesuit church in Rome. The suitability of the Catalan type of church to the needs of the Society could hardly have escaped him. Even in Rome there was an example of this type of architecture in the church of S. Maria di Monserrato. We know that he took a keen interest in the Gesù, an interest that was entirely practical, which led to differences with his patron, Cardinal Farnese. On the question of the barrel-vaulted ceiling he had to yield to the Cardinal—St Francis wanted a flat wooden ceiling to act as a sounding board for the preacher’s voice.

With such practical advantages to recommend it, we need not be surprised to find the Gesù or ‘single nave’ plan most commonly in use among the Jesuits. The presence in Rome between 1558–75 of Br Giovanni Tristano may also help to explain the popularity of this type of building. Br Tristano came from an architectural family in Ferrara. He had already practised as an architect for some time before entering the Society. In his churches he favoured a plan similar to that of the Gesù: a ‘single nave’, triumphal arch at the intersection of the choir and transept, and a simple façade in two orders with volutes. As he was consultor to the General on architectural matters, all plans had to pass through his hands. Though he could not impose his ideas on local superiors and architects, his suggestions would have been welcomed for
their obvious practical value. It is interesting to note, however, that the ‘single nave’ plan which he favoured, though suitable to the needs of the Society, was not always considered the best. The General, Fr Vitelleschi, writing in 1627 of the ‘central’ plan, with the usual preoccupation of superiors in the practical aspects of architecture, says: ‘This plan is well thought out, well proportioned, and well adapted to the ministry of the Society. Besides being spacious for celebrating Mass, open and in full view, an oval interior is best for preaching ... It avoids the inconvenience of many of the French churches where the voice of the preacher is swallowed up by a multitude of chapels, galleries, etc., so that it cannot be heard, according to the common complaint, beyond the second chapel and the triumphal arch’.

The ‘single nave’ plan, which hardly amounts to a distinct style, though neither originated nor monopolized by the Jesuits has the best claim of any to be called the ‘Jesuit style’. It is not, however, baroque, unless that term is extended to include every form of architecture from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The Gesù and other buildings of its type belong to a period which, until recently, has not received sufficient attention from art historians, chiefly because of absence of great names and the poor quality of the work produced during it. The period covers almost a century, from the pontificate of Paul III, 1534, to the appearance of Bernini in 1620. Though Michelangelo was still alive when it began, the Renaissance had exhausted itself and, as so often happens, given place to academic and eclectic imitations of earlier achievements. Its art is cold, sad, conventional and monotonous. The period corresponds to the early years of the Counter Reformation, when, contrary to popular notions, the Church reacted against the extravagances of the previous age and brought back ecclesiastical art to its proper function of instructing, elevating and providing a setting for worship. Churches were ‘severe and majestic’, decorated in sombre marbles, with pictures more edifying than accomplished—it is surprising how many Jesuit churches of this type are described as ‘sombre’, ‘austere’, ‘sober’, ‘elegant’ and ‘regular’.

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It was in reaction to this pedantic and arid art that the baroque came into being. The baroque style does not appear as a fully coherent art form until the time of Bernini, 1620, and the germs of it (if we except an anticipation by Michelangelo) cannot be traced back further than about 1590. But by 1584 the Gesù was already completed—not the Gesù we have today. Here we are at the root of much confused thinking about Jesuit style.
The decoration of the Gesù as it is today is certainly baroque, but the Gesù of 1584 was a far more austere building. It did not receive its baroque decoration until nearly a century after it had been built. Bernini was already dead when the 'Triumph of the Name of Jesus' was painted on the ceiling of the nave, and Pozzo's 'St Ignatius entering heavenly glory' was not begun until 1696, when the centre of baroque art had shifted from Rome to Paris.

To speak of the Jesuits seizing on the baroque and harnessing it vaingloriously to the triumphal car of their Church, is not quite accurate. They employed it, as every other Order that was building at the time employed it, for the glorification of their saints. But in that they were not leading but following. It was the Papacy which first seized on this style and employed Bernini and later Borromini to glorify St Peter's and the Roman churches and palaces. Except for a bust of St Robert Bellarmine and a chapel dedicated to St Andrew, Bernini, good friend of the Jesuits though he was, was not called on to work for them. Since decoration was not commissioned by the Society—at least at first—but donated by benefactors, the Jesuits could exercise less discretion in its choice. When they did use it, they were often trying to hide the cheap materials of their buildings.

Since the triumph of the Counter Reformation was not the personal triumph of the Jesuits but of the whole Church, baroque art, which reflected the triumph, was used by all sections of the Church to celebrate their part in it; not, therefore, by the Jesuits alone nor even primarily by the Jesuits. To speak as Professor Blunt speaks of one of Philippe de Champaigne's pictures as being 'in its restraint and simplicity... as typical of the Jansenist approach to a miracle as Bernini's 'St Theresa' is of the Jesuit' 1 is nothing short of paradoxical. No less paradoxical is the notion that baroque art is aimed at an ecstasy of the senses and that in this it was inspired by the Spiritual Exercises. In the first place, the baroque, like the gothic, strove to elevate the mind to the infinite, the supramundane, but, whereas gothic art used the pure architectural lines of a building, baroque included gesture and the imagery of clouds, rays, etc., a combination of architecture, sculpture and painting. In this way it was hoped that the sensuous elements in pagan Renaissance art might be made to serve a loftier purpose. The use of the senses in the Spiritual Exercises is quite different. To avoid the deceptive vagueness of false mysticism when contemplating the Mysteries of the life of Christ, St Ignatius wished the exercitant to bring home to himself the stark reality of the scene and thus give edge and precision to his reasoning about it, and apply its lessons with greater profit to his own life. There is a prosaic, practical realism about St Ignatius's use of the senses which has little in common with baroque flamboyance and rhetoric. In its homeliness

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1 The Art and Architecture of France, 1500–1700.
it breathes the spirit of Giotto, de la Tour, Millet and Rouault; in its severe practicality it is close to the art of the early Counter Reformation.

How then did 'Jesuit style' come to be a synonym for baroque? Primarily, one would say, through confusing baroque architecture and decoration with the art which preceded it. Partly, too, because the age of baroque corresponded with the expansion of the Society, so that in some countries the number of Jesuit baroque churches is large. It is possible, however, that, at least in Protestant countries, baroque art is disliked because of its associations with the Counter Reformation, and since in the popular Protestant imagination the Jesuits were the evil geniuses of that movement, the term 'Jesuit style' carried the appropriate nuance. Herbert Read denies this: the Protestant dislike for baroque art, he says, is not moral but aesthetic. On the other hand, Protestants who favour baroque art have to plead with their readers not to be deterred by the associations this art may have: 'The artistic significance of the style which the Jesuits employed, remains something wholly independent of the uses to which they put it'.

In conclusion it may be said that the term 'Jesuit style' may have a meaning in countries where the use of the 'single nave' plan with renaissance, baroque or rococo decoration clearly distinguishes Jesuit churches from those of other Orders, as in Austria and Southern Germany; but to identify it with baroque seems purely arbitrary and in any event must be confined to surface decoration. If one looks for an original Jesuit contribution to art, it will be found where it is found in Jesuit spirituality and education: in the persistent subordination of art to the needs of the ministry, or, to use a modern word, in its functionalism.

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1 Geoffrey Scott: op. cit.

We hope to publish in a subsequent issue an essay on

*The Jesuits in Ireland.*