

THE MODERNIST RELIGIOUS PAINTING OF ROY DE MAISTRE 1930-1960.

Heather Johnson

In 1960 Roy de Maistre's religious paintings provoked the following diverse comments from English critics:

This country has not produced today a more important religious painter than de Maistre.¹

[His work] came over to me with very great conviction ... it seemed to me that here was a powerful, knotty personality which did convey something one felt was true and real.²

And conversely:

I'm not emotionally or intellectually convinced by these religious pictures and I'm not sure whether this is due to this cubist language.³

... it seems to me that there is an ambiguity of style ... religion has, in short, got the better of art.⁴

This paper is essentially a brief case study of some of the religious paintings of Roy de Maistre, a study which demonstrates the interaction of the spiritual beliefs and the personal and professional life of a painter. At times these two aspects, that is the spirituality and the painting, blend together to produce superior and uplifting works of art. At other times the spiritual beliefs and the mundane conflict harshly, resulting in work that could best be described as mediocre.

De Maistre had, since his earliest painting days, expressed a spiritual side to his nature. By the early 1930s he started to look for meaning in the formal Christian faith, joining the Catholic church in the late 1940s.

De Maistre publicly expressed his belief in Catholicism in being baptised and confirmed into the Catholic church and in this paper I do not want to question or undermine his commitment to this faith. I do want, though, to propose that his motivation in joining the Catholic church and his turning to religious painting was complex, and to argue that this complexity resulted in an unevenness in his painting style and a lack of conviction in some of his religious paintings, which resulted in the contradictory opinions above.

Although he had established himself as a modernist painter in Australia in the 1920s, de Maistre left this country in 1930 mainly as a result of the Depression and his inability to earn his living, and as a response to what he felt was a lack of understanding of his work.

Almost immediately he arrived in England he was perceived as a modern painter of some note. Within two months of his arrival he held an exhibition in the Beaux Arts Gallery in London — reviewed in *Apollo* magazine in July 1930.⁵ In August, 1930, three months after he arrived, he had an exhibition with the English artist, Francis Bacon, who was at this time working as an interior designer; and that exhibition was recorded with photographs in *Studio* magazine.⁶

De Maistre's work, *Francis Bacon's Queensbury Mews Studio*, 1930 [oil/canvas, 62.5 x 44.5, private collection] shows a screen, furniture and a rug designed by Bacon. De Maistre uses a modernist technique of simplified shape and flattened perspective to depict the stark modernist space of Bacon's studio. He has signed his name beside that of Bacon's signature on the rug — linking the modernist designer, Bacon, and the modernist painter, himself.⁷

De Maistre was to paint several further works of Bacon's studio, such as *Still Life*, 1933 [oil/canvas, 91.5 x 60.5, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra] which shows Bacon's rugs and the tubular chrome and glass table; and stylistically, the beginnings of a cubist compression and fracturing of space in his own work.

De Maistre was also one of the first artists to have a one-artist exhibition in the Mayor Gallery, newly opened in London in 1933. Mayor's policy was to exhibit and promote the most progressive and 'advanced' art and artists who were largely avoided by other London galleries.⁸ De Maistre was given a one-artist exhibition at the Gallery in November 1934. By then the

gallery was well recognised as the leading exponent of modern art in London.

The exhibition must have been one of the highlights of de Maistre's career — the artists preceding him with one artist exhibitions at the gallery were Max Ernst, Jean Miro, Eric Gill, Edward Wadsworth, and Paul Klee, and immediately before him, in October 1934, Picasso.

The works that can be identified from the exhibition indicate that the paintings de Maistre showed were a mixture of surrealist works, and others, such as *On the Slips*, c.1934 [oil/board, 63.5 x 76.2, private collection] influenced by the hard edge and compacted perspective of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, an influence de Maistre was showing before he left Australia. In this work de Maistre has captured the feeling of poised tension through the sharp definition of form, a technique which was a characteristic of the surrealist works of artists like Wadsworth.

De Maistre also had a work reproduced in the first edition of Herbert Read's *Art Now* in 1933, *Composition*, c.1933 (the reproduced work has not been located).

By the late 1930s, however, de Maistre's star was very much on the wane. His association with the Mayor Gallery ended. His work was also dropped from the second edition of *Art Now*, published in 1936. His association with Francis Bacon and other avant-garde English artists lessened considerably. (Elsewhere, I have argued the reasons for this.)⁹

He retreated into a world of private patronage, exhibiting in provincial or small private London galleries and painting mostly religious work. His removal from trying to find a place for himself in mainstream art production appears to have been a conscious and radical decision.

Arguments based on Freudian notions of desire have been mounted by art historians concerning the manufacture of a unique space/place outside the mainstream of art production by artists such as Thea Proctor, Freda Kahlo and Wyndham Lewis.¹⁰ Similarly de Maistre created a space for himself — an aristocratic space — falsely claiming a royal lineage and retreating into an aristocratic form of art, religious painting.

De Maistre claimed that his grandfather, Prosper de Mestre who arrived in Australia in 1818, had been the off-spring of themorganatic marriage between Edward, Duke of Kent (Queen Victoria's father) and his mistress.¹¹ The story has since been well

disproved by historians,¹² but de Maistre used it to impress and deceive friends. Works such as *Procession*, c.1937 [oil/paperboard, 63.5 x 76, Art Gallery of New South Wales] a depiction of the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Kent have been cited as evidence of de Maistre's closeness to the royal family, but can be traced to newspaper photographs (in this case, *Star*, 12 May 1937).

By the construction of an aristocratic or royal persona de Maistre was able to set himself above the mundane of art production and marketing: a position which enabled him to also set himself above the need to sell his art and hence to accommodate the production of religious art, for which there was no market. At the same time his production of religious art, removed from the art market and not expected to sell, enabled him to withstand the rejection of his art by the public market.

In this way de Maistre, however strong his faith, also exploited Catholicism for his personal needs. This exploitation ranged from a holding of views antithetical to catholicism such as a belief in re-incarnation and homosexual practice, to the emphasis on the aesthetics of Catholic worship.

David Konstant, the present Bishop of Leeds in England and a god-son of de Maistre, called de Maistre's faith 'uncomplicated and simple', saying that he

would never have concerned himself either with ecclesiastical 'politics' or with the latest theological commentaries ... He loved the grandeur of a solemn religious ceremony (the 'dim religious light') ... [and believed] that religion isn't primarily concerned with understanding but with a kind of total appreciation that ... deeply involves one's aesthetic sensibilities.¹³

In spite of this, the consciousness of the production is evident in much of de Maistre's religious work. Works which appear spontaneous depictions of faith are, instead, the result of an often laborious process. For example, his work, *Carol Singers*, 1943 [oil/paperboard, 94 x 73.8, Art Gallery of New South Wales], a major work which encompasses de Maistre's design ability, his interest in his colour/music theories (in the colour chart on the music stand, and the subject matter) and his piety was arrived at, as were most of his works, through a series of abstractions from a realistic work. De Maistre evolved *Carol Singers* from a pencil

sketch, *Note for a Figure composition*, Dec.27 1942, 1942 through progressively more abstracted painted forms of the work.

Similarly, his work *Madonna and Child* [oil/canvas, 120 x 91, Carrick Hill, South Australia] was derived from a realistic portrait of a close friend, Florence Bevan (*Portrait of Mrs Florence Bevan*, 1937-39 [oil/canvas, 116.25 x 88.75, private collection]). The work started as a very singular and personal work. De Maistre has surrounded the figure with embroidery done by Bevan's brother for whom she kept house, and who was a major patron of de Maistre.

De Maistre thought that in working for her brother Bevan was unable to fulfill her own wishes and desires, and described her as having a cage around her soul. He depicted this in a concrete way in a second version of the work, *Woman in a Chair*, c.1944 [oil/canvas, 122.5 x 92, Art Gallery of South Australia] by enclosing the figure's head in a strange helmet-like structure. He later extended this thought to the plight of all women as epitomised in the iconology of the Madonna and Child.

These stages of abstraction in de Maistre's works were appreciated by critics, one of whom commented:

we have so clear a direction and so logical a working-over of it ... it is possible to watch each move of the artist's mind in his steady climb from the lowland slopes of the familiar physical until he reaches the heights, where appearances are superseded by essence.¹⁴

The process of abstraction was likened to prayer:

At first words, the material manifestation of prayer are necessary to the novice, but later the mystic has no need of these props and attains the only essential of prayer, the union of the soul with God without their assistance.¹⁵

De Maistre began a formal association with Catholic art by exhibiting in an exhibition of modern religious art in 1945. In a review of the exhibition in the *Catholic Herald* his four works were singled out for mention and he was called a 'religious painter' who was 'not afraid to express his ideas in abstract terms'.¹⁶

One of the works exhibited, *The Crucifixion*, 1932-45 [oil/paperboard, 81.5 x 58.8, Art Gallery of New South Wales], is perhaps de Maistre's most simple religious painting in terms of

composition and subject matter, and by the same means the most direct, deeply felt and complex expression of his faith. The work focuses on the torso of Christ, outstretched on the cross. The bent head, with its crown of thorns, forms a dark and tormented heart of the painting.

As in his other successful works, de Maistre has achieved a fine balance between passion and decorative control. He has depicted the body of Christ stretched and fixed to the cross, pierced and distorted by geometric lines, twisted in position, unable to move, the head sagging in impending lifelessness. But at the same time the rigidity and control of the ruled lines traversing the chest, the strong musculature of the arms, the forward position of the left leg, and the thrusting upwards of a breakaway branch of the crown of thorns convey a feeling of power and strength. The figure could, with a twist of the body and wrenching of the arms, free itself from the cross.

This feeling is further conveyed by the disruption in the horizon line behind the figure. Half the earth has shifted upwards, a major fault line has opened behind the figure, the earth could sink in on itself covering the dead/dying Christ or the figure could burst back to life and the threatened upheaval of the earth sink back into place.

One of de Maistre's friends recalled him expressing his belief in the power of Christ: that rather than being meek and mild Christ was possessing of and hence also a source of great strength.¹⁷

It is in works such as *The Crucifixion* in which he has balanced subject matter, passion and his knowledge of formal design, that de Maistre's talent shows best.

De Maistre last found a niche in the organisational side of Catholic art. In 1946 he was made a member of the committee of the London branch of the newly founded International Society of Sacred Art. The committee's chair person was Joan Morris, later well known for her feminist texts concerning women and the church, *Against Nature and God* (1973) and *Pope Joan* (1983).¹⁸ Other committee members included art critics and writers, members of the clergy, and artists including de Maistre.¹⁹

The society was founded because of a felt need for the visual representation of faith and that that representation should be in a new form, suitable for the 'present era of culture'.²⁰ It was felt that visual representation of faith should not be something added to churches after everything else was paid for but an end in itself.²¹

By the mid 1940s modern art was acceptable in the secular art world of England, not only in London in major modern art museums such as the Tate Gallery, but also in regional areas, such as Leeds and Leicester, where the galleries had built up large collections of modern English works. Within church patronage, however, the battle for modern art was still being fought. By concentrating on religious art and being involved in organisations trying to promote it, de Maistre must have felt still at the forefront of the art world, still a member of an avant-garde movement, as he had been on his arrival in England in 1930.

Writers, critics, art historians and enlightened church officials joined in the cause for modern religious art at this time. Eric Newton (art critic for the *Sunday Times*, London), writing in the New York published *Liturgical Arts* in 1950, argued that 'at each moment in the history of man, the art he produced was the inevitable expression of the spirit of the age' and that all great church art had been 'of its time'.²² Newton also thought that as modern art had 'broken away from realism ... it contains precisely that very element of timelessness which the church needs and could use'.²³ *Studio* magazine published an article by the Rev Canon Walter Hussey of St Matthew's Church, Northampton lamenting that the 'majority of work that is put into churches nowadays ... is either a weak and sentimental essay in the most over-ripe Raphaellesque tradition, or occasionally a self-conscious straining after a modernesque style' which divested its subject of 'force' and 'vitality'.²⁴

Hussey reported the success of his Church's commissioning of the Hornton stone sculpture, *Madonna and Child*, from Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland's painting, *The Crucifixion*, and urged that 'it is among the finest and most profound artists that the Church should seek help as often as possible'.²⁵

Although Eric Newton contended that there never was a time more favourable to church painting's renewal because 'At last we have emerged from the age when the external appearance was all that interested the artist. Now he is all for inner significance', those representing the church remained unconvinced.²⁶ In spite of his devoting himself to religious painting, de Maistre received only two commissions for work from the Catholic church: a set of the stations of the Cross for Westminster Cathedral, London in 1954, and two panels for St Aidan's Church, East Acton, London, in 1961.

Painting a series of the Stations of the Cross was of great importance to de Maistre. But, as has been indicated, there was also an element of contrivance in de Maistre's concentrating on religious work and this contrivance appears to have affected his work nowhere more apparently than in the range of quality in the *Stations of the Cross*.

The series contains some of de Maistre's most successful works, such as *Christ Falls under the Cross*, (Station IX), c.1956 [oil/canvas, 80 x 61, Ashmolean Museum] (The Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral are small works, approximately 65 x 30; they are framed in deep frames with convex glazing making them impossible to measure or photograph; the works discussed here from the series are virtually identical versions of the works except for the sizes.) In this work de Maistre has drawn together his superior skill and his deep piety to produce a work in which the colour and design act to depict and evoke the horror of Christ's burden — made all the more terrible because of its beauty. De Maistre has achieved a hypnotizing tension between powerful attraction and powerful revulsion. The cross — itself made beautiful with its highly polished surface — reflects the surrounding beauty of the countryside; at the same time it is, by way of its strong diagonal thrust and its colour—blending with the landscape, a falling, crushing, killing instrument of death.

A similar depth of feeling is achieved by de Maistre in *Pieta* (Station XIII), 1953 [oil/canvas, 152.5 x 114.5, Tate Gallery] where the repetition of sharp angles in the figures, echoing the angles and thorns of Christ's discarded crown on the right, vividly depict the acuteness and cruelty of the mother's/mothers' pain.

Other works in the series are, however, marred by an apparent lack of feeling created in most cases by the perfunctory nature of the depiction of the secondary figures in the works. Often these figures appear wooden, lifeless, disproportioned and distracting. This can be seen in the two outer figures in *Christ is Nailed to the Cross* (Station XI), 1958 [oil/canvas, 152.4 x 114.4, Queensland Art Gallery]. The stilted drawing and rigid form of these figures detracts from, rather than enhances, the freer and more lively form of the Christ figure and the dynamism of the upright posts of the two other crosses and the ladders.

Some of de Maistre's religious work had an appeal beyond the church. *The Deposition*, 1946 [oil/canvas, 142 x 112, British Council collection], for example, was purchased by the British Council in

1950. The work is a conventional deposition scene with Christ being lowered from the cross. The composition is compact with the three figures joined to form a strong diagonal ovoid form in the lower left of the painting, and the right hand side and top third of the work comprised of a complex overlapping of shapes and forms derived from the crosses, the ladder, the thorny bush and shafts of light. The repetition of strong diagonal lines (such as those in the ladder and the rigid green 'drapery'), the shafts of white light, the triangular pattern on the cross beam of the cross, and the opposition of green and red tones in the work seem at first emphatically decorative and add to the flat patterned quality of the painting.

The work can, however, also be read as strongly symbolic. The ovoid or egg shaped form and the green colour (in the upper right of the painting, the upper part of the cross and on Christ's shoulders) are symbolic of new life and growth. In Jungian terms de Maistre has captured the combination of pagan fertility myth and Christian beliefs in Christ's death and resurrection that comprise Easter. Jung's theories of the collective unconscious, the appeal of the archetypal symbols and forms, could be offered as an explanation, beyond a more superficial attraction of colour, decorativeness, and skilled composition, for the appeal of de Maistre's religious work beyond the church.²⁷

Iris Conlay, art critic for the *Catholic Herald*, quoted de Maistre as saying, 'Religion is not merely a subject for painting but a perpetual reality which has preoccupied me ever since I remember and it is inseparable from every other thought'.²⁸ An examination of the artist's life and practice reveals, however, not a simple adoption of a faith, but a complex psychological manoeuvring into a specific genre of art: a manoeuvring performed so that de Maistre could continue painting in a style, manner and role — that of a modernist artist — in which he saw himself. As another friend remarked of de Maistre: 'The courtesy and spirit of the man we knew were a combination of both his art and his religion.'²⁹

REFERENCES

1. Iris Conlay, 'Pictures in Church: No. 502', *Catholic Herald*, (20 May 1960), p.3.
2. Laurence Kitchin, 'The Critics', 22 May 1960, type-written manuscript of section of BBC radio programme, p.5, Whitechapel Art Gallery, press clipping book.
3. Basil Taylor, *ibid.*
4. John Russell, *ibid.*
5. 'Review 10', *Apollo*, XII, (July 1930), p.82.
6. 'The 1930 Look in British Decoration', *The Studio*, Vol.100, (August 1930), pp.140-145.
7. All the works cited in this paper are reproduced in Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre. The English Years 1930-1968* (Sydney: Craftsmans House, 1995); measurements are height x width in cm.
8. Nigel Halliday, 'English Responses to Contemporary European Art between c.1926 and 1936: A Study of five modern art galleries in London', (London: Courtauld Institute of Art, London University, MA Report, 1979), p.33.
9. Heather Johnson, 'The Problem of "gendered space": Roy de Maistre and Surrealism', *Australian Journal of Art*, Vol.XI, (1993), pp.85-107.
10. Avenel Mitchell, 'Thea Proctor (1879-1966): Aspects of Elitism 1921-1940', (Sydney: Fine Arts IV thesis, University of Sydney, 1980); Terry Smith, 'Marginality and Modernity: The Case of Frida Kahlo', *Lip*, No.8, (1984), pp.39-58; David Peters Corbett, 'Fantasy and the Imaginary Artist: Wyndham Lewis in the 20s', abstract and lecture, *Subversions/Objects*, Association of Art Historians Annual Conference, Leeds, (10-12 April 1993).
11. Roy de Maistre, letter to Melanie de Mestre/Ramsay, (16 May 1946), private collection
12. Mollie Gillen, *The Prince and His Lady*, (London: 1970); Margaret and Neville de Mestre, *Prosper de Mestre in Australia*, Occasional Paper No. 2, (Sydney: French/Australian Research Centre, University of New South Wales, undated [1990]).
13. David Konstant, letter to writer, (21 August 1988).
14. *Arthur Pollen and Roy de Maistre*, (London: Ashley Gallery, undated [1950]).
15. *ibid.*
16. 'Modern Religious Art', *Catholic Herald*, (30 November 1945), p.3.
17. Iris Portal, interview with writer, (28 July 1988).
18. Joan Morris, *Against Nature and God*, (New York: 1973); Joan Morris, *Pope Joan*, (London: 1983). I am indebted to Winefride Pruden for her generous information concerning Joan Morris and the International Society of Sacred Art in Pruden, letter to writer 26 April 1988.
19. 'Editorial', *Art Notes*, Vol.X, No.2, (Summer 1946).
20. *ibid.*
21. *ibid.*
22. Eric Newton, 'Modernism and Religious Art', *Liturgical Arts*, (August 1950), pp.88-90, p.88.
23. *ibid.*, p.90.
24. Rev Canon Walter Hussey, 'A Churchman discusses Art in the Church', *Studio*, Vol.138, No.678, (September 1949), pp.80-81, 95, p.80.
25. *ibid.*
26. Quoted in Iris Conlay, 'Contemporary Religious Art in England', *Liturgical Arts*, (May 1951), pp.71-73, p.73.

27. See, for example, Joseph L Henderson, 'Ancient Myths and Modern Man', in Carl G Jung ed., *Man and His Symbols*, (London 1964), pp.104-157, pp.107-110.
28. Iris Conlay, 'Pictures in Church: No.502', *Catholic Herald*, (20 May 1960), p.3.
29. [Father Mark Taylor], 'Roy de Maistre', *Tablet*, (9 March 1968), pp.237-8, p.238.