



*We are God's work of art
created in Christ Jesus*

Ephesians 2.10

Art and the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church has a long tradition of engagement with the visual arts. Catholic churches – even the most minimalist – will have representations of the Virgin Mary, the saints, the Stations of the Cross. Most churches have a statue of the Sacred Heart – a particular devotion for many Catholics. Pope Gregory the Great remarked, in the 6th century, that: ‘art in the Church can do for the illiterate what literature can do for those who read’. The Order of Preachers, the Dominican priests, brothers and sisters, talk of *muta praedicatio* – silent preaching. It seems that the visual can sometimes say what words are incapable of articulating. If you go to St. Albans Abbey, you can see the medieval paintings that told the congregation of the basic truths of the Christian faith: that Jesus died for us and rose again to set us free. The paintings and sculptures in a Catholic Church are an indispensable part of the imaginative life of the ordinary parish, as they provide a vehicle for personal and communal devotion and reflection.

Gabriele Finaldi, the curator of the exhibition ‘Seeing Salvation’ 2001, at the National Gallery, has this to say: ‘The early Church soon recognised that the Incarnation of God allowed a completely new perspective on the problem of representation and that image-making could serve the purposes of exploring the mystery of Christ, of fixing his person in the mind of the faithful; it could also play a role of great importance in the transmission of the faith. It was clearly understood, of course, that the images were not to be confused with Christ himself. Honour and worship were due to the reality represented and not to the image.’

And the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) encourages us to express the truth of our relationship with God by emulating his creativity and by seeking beauty in our works of art. (CCC 2501)

Here in the church of Our Lady and St. Andrew, we are privileged to have some unique pieces of art work. Please take some time to study them. You may find them interesting or conducive to prayer; alternatively, they may not be to your taste – perhaps the challenge of art that does not speak to us is to ponder why! Is there a challenge in the piece that is unsettling or disturbing? The Rev Giles Fraser, in Thought for the Day (4th March 2010) said this:

Revelation is an unfashionable category of understanding, for we like to have meaning in our own hands and under our own control. What God and good art have in common is that we all have to wait for them to reveal themselves in their own terms. They don't come with built in explanations. For mostly these explanations are just expressions of our own impatience. Which is why, with God, as with art, we are often better off with no explanations at all.

Our Lady Immaculate and St. Andrew

The original church, which is now the Church Hall, was consecrated in 1902. There are still some of the stained glass windows in situ. These are the work of Theodore Kern (see below). The windows of Our Lady and St. Joseph were installed in memory of Fr Wilfrid Manser who was Parish Priest from 1932-49 and were blessed by the Provincial of the Assumptionist Order, Fr James Whitworth, sometime before 1952 – the exact date is uncertain. The cost was £70 and the monies raised by a subscription list and a series of retiring collections. The window of the Sacred Heart is a memorial to Mr & Mrs Henry Sell who lived nearby and had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This window was installed and blessed by Fr Aidan Kenny around 1953.¹

There are some pictures showing the original layout, statuary, and artefacts of the old church on the wall in the corridor leading to the sacristies in the new.

The Catholic population rose dramatically after the end of the Second World War and by the early 1970s it was apparent that a new church was needed. The present church was consecrated in 1977.

You can find a fuller history on our website:

http://www.rcdow.org.uk/fileupload/site_builder/Short%20History%20of%20Hitchin1042012171517.pdf

A lot of the art works and features of the old church were disposed of – the two styles being incompatible, and the new church reflecting a different theology of space and liturgical practice. The statues of St. Michael and St. Andrew are from the old church however.



¹ Details supplied by Fr Andrew O'Dell AA in a letter 28th July 2012.

Theodore Kern

The artist responsible for most of the art in the church was Theodore (or Theodor) Kern. (for a video clip featuring Fr Andrew O'Dell talking about the work of Theodore Kern go to <https://1drv.ms/v/s!AmIJkjqNV8Zig8YO56qJyxy1A7AJ0w?e=Naetgm>)

Theodore Kern was born in Salzburg, Austria, on 10th July 1900. He settled permanently in England in 1938 and died in Hitchin on 28th February 1969. He studied art at the Vienna Academy of Fine Art and pursued further studies in Paris and Italy. He is known as a painter, ecclesiastical sculptor and wood carver. As a young man, he worked on a number of projects in and around Vienna and collaborated with Anton Faistauer, one of the most important pioneers of Modern painting in Austria. His works were varied – paintings as well as murals; his commissions were both religious and secular. (2)



Hallein, nr Salzburg, Austria. Mural on Town Hall

He travelled extensively in England and France and finally emigrated to England in 1938, settling in Hitchin. By this time he was focussing exclusively on religious subjects. After the end of the Second World War, he worked on the restoration of bombed and damaged churches as well as on new projects.

He was married to Frieda and they were a devoted couple, according to parishioners who knew them here in Hitchin. They had no children. They came to England as refugees after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. Frieda died in 1980.

Kern was a respected local artist and his works can be found in Hitchin Museum, Luton, and Letchworth. You can access 94 of his works via: http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/search/painted_by/theodor-kern

Included on this website, you will find an unfinished painting entitled *Interior with 3 Heavily Draped Figures, 2 Seated*. For many Christians, this painting will tell a particular story – that of Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary at

Bethany... for the secular world it remains a study of three shrouded figures. There are also portraits of the artist and his wife; landscapes, abstracts, still life...



The Stations of the Cross (*Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the cross*)

The Stations of the Cross are part of any Catholic church or chapel – they may be a stark wooden cross plus number; a detailed tableau or painting; mosaic or fresco; ornate or plain, simple wood or richly decorated; the 14 Stations hung on the walls are part and parcel of the fabric of Catholic devotional life, particularly during the season of Lent. They depict the final hours of the life and death of Jesus and give a focus for meditation and prayer.

These were given to the parish after Theodore Kern's death by his widow. Apparently they had been left in his shed! The parish priest at the time, Fr Andrew O'Dell, agreed to give them a home and they were mounted and framed.

Situated around the walls.



The Statues of St. Andrew and St. Michael.

St. Andrew is one of the patrons of the parish and his statue shows him holding the saltire, the X shaped cross on which he was executed.

St. Michael could be confused with St. George as he is defeating what looks like a dragon. This is a representation of Michael the Archangel's victory over Satan. The boy's secondary school run by the Assumptionist Order was St. Michael's School. (It is now the Police Station across the road.) Frieda Kern gave Fr O'Dell a tiny clay model of the statue of St. Andrew which he still has. Fr O'Dell recalls the statues being placed in the original church around 1947 or 1948, one each side of the sanctuary. It was said that the wood used had been salvaged from the bombed House of Commons.²

Situated diagonally across from each other in the corners.



² Letter cited above.

Laetare Plaque

A wooden plaque depicting the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child. Laetare means 'Rejoice' in Latin.

Situated to the right hand side of the sanctuary on the wall.



The Golden Our Lady

This statue was left to the church by Theodore Kern in his will. It replaced the original and more conventional blue and white Madonna that you can see in the photos of the old church. Our Lady is the name traditionally applied to Mary by Catholics. A parishioner was later given a framed drawing of Mary and the infant Jesus, by Frieda Kern – obviously a study for the golden statue. (7)

Situated in the side altar to the left as you come into the church.



Jesus and the Cross

A painting that reflects Kern's abstract work. We need to look very closely at the painting to identify Christ and his cross. Has he fallen? Is someone drawing him to his feet? There appears to be a hand on his shoulder. (8)

Situated on the back wall near the Children's Library.



Jesus and his mother

Three figures – Jesus as a child, his mother and another female figure. Is the younger woman, Mary? Maybe this is Jesus with his mother and grandmother? We don't know for certain.

Situated on the back wall near the organ.



Christ crowned with Thorns

This picture was recently discovered stowed away in the loft in the Parish House. It depicts a bloodied Jesus with the crown of thorns on his head. (10)

Situated in the corridor leading to the sacristies.



The Sacred Heart

Not every piece of art or statuary in the church is by Theodore Kern. There is a statue of the Sacred Heart, situated near the statue of St. Michael. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is very popular among Catholics. The statue represents the complete and utter love that Jesus has for us all – that is the symbolism of the heart on fire with love and tenderness.

Situated to the right hand side as you enter. Artist unknown



The Creation Panels

Three panels which form a frieze on the theme of Creation. These were painted by a Benedictine nun from Turvey Abbey, Bedfordshire. They form part of the children's area and were a gift from a parishioner. *(Noah and his family give thanks)* They were restored within the last few years.

Situated in the Children's library area.



Noah's Ark icon

This icon was donated by Laura Cole to the church. It was created by her friend's Father-in-law, Graham Lock of Chatham. It adds to the children's area with its colourful depiction of the scene.



Madonna and Child

A recent donation from a parishioner when she moved home, this is another Theodore Kern painting to complement the growing collection. (15)

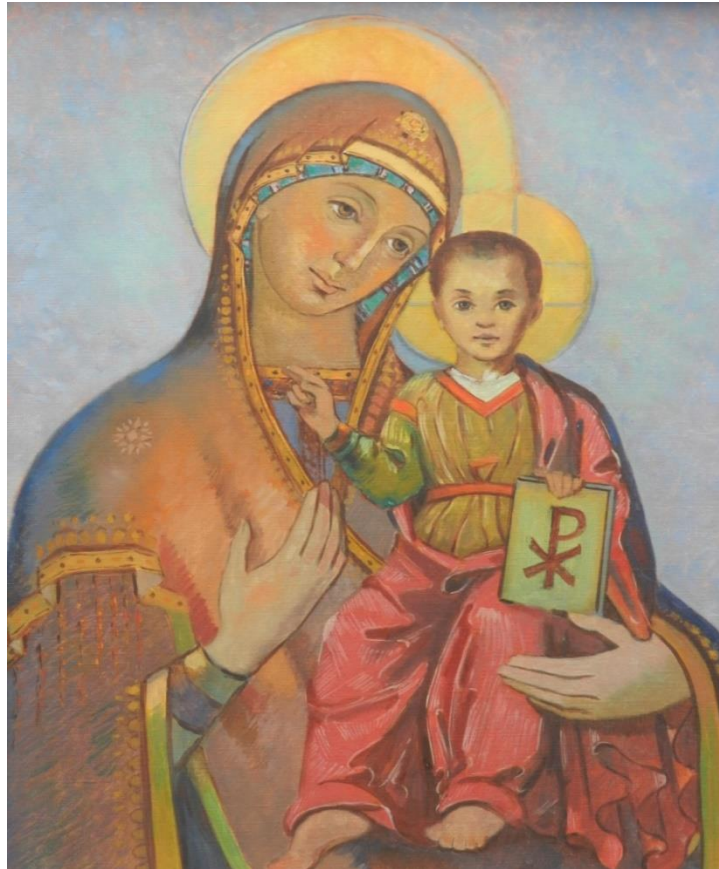
Situated behind the organ by the parish library



Our Lady Help of the Bereaved

This portrait of the Madonna and Child dates was commissioned by Fr Robert Henshaw in the early 1980s. It has been placed in the area where the parish has its book of remembrance and where the bereaved can come to pray and to light a candle for their loved ones. The artist chose a Byzantine style Madonna in response to Fr Robert's request. While not an icon, it has iconic elements, the aim of which is to allow the viewer to be drawn into the painting – a window into heaven, as it were.

The painting is by a local artist, Pier Luigi Baffoni, and was installed with a special ceremony on a feast of Our Lady (it is uncertain as to which one).



Baffoni was born in Turin in 1932 and comes from a family of professional artists. He settled in England in 1973, subsequently becoming a member of the Federation of British Artists, the National Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Printmakers (1975) and the Royal Institute of Oil Painters (1979). He has received several prizes for his oil paintings. A selection can be seen at www.theroi.org.uk and www.mallgalleries.org.uk. He paints a wide variety of subjects including portraits. Church paintings in the locality may be found nearby – there is a large depiction of St. Augustine in the church of St. Francis of Assisi in Shefford, and of the Nativity in the church of the Holy Family in Luton.

Situated in the corner on the left hand side as you enter.

Sacred Art – something to ponder as we look around us.

So then, what is sacred art? Inseparable from liturgical function, sacred art is simply that which stimulates worship and accompanies prayer. For us Westerners, function determines sacrality, not style. Decorum, certainly, demands that style be appropriate to the subject. But decisions about appropriateness entail a certain generosity toward the point in history which is ours. Charity, then, becomes the motive for acquiring the necessary sophistication to make fitting judgments. Anything less is ingratitude for the gift of this moment.

