

## **GRAHAM SUTHERLAND (1903-80)**

### **LIFE**

Sutherland, born in London, trained initially as a railway engineer; and then as an artist (in etching and engraving) at Goldsmith's College, (1921-6). From 1928-39 he taught at Chelsea School of Art. His experiences during the war as a war artist altered his style. He moved from romanticism (he had as a student been heavily influenced by Samuel Palmer) to a harsher, spiky approach reflecting the horrors of war. He undertook several religious paintings (see below) before he accepted the commission for the Coventry Tapestry. He had strong links with Pembrokeshire (which influenced his work) and with France (where he bought a house in 1955).

### **COVENTRY TAPESTRY – 1962**

74'8" x 38'

Basil Spence had included a tapestry depicting the Crucifixion to go behind the altar in his initial designs for the new cathedral at Coventry. He had seen (and bought) Sutherland's tapestry *Wading Birds* and liked his Northampton *Crucifixion* and so invited Sutherland in 1951 to undertake the Tapestry for Coventry. Sutherland worked (intermittently for he had many other commissions) at the tapestry for ten years.

### **BRIEFS / INFLUENCES / SOURCES**

#### **Briefs**

Sutherland had to work within guidelines provided by Spence and by the Cathedral authorities. Both wanted a design which would speak to the ordinary person and not something highly abstract.

*Spence* told him he wanted the tapestry to depict Christ in glory in the Tetramorph (four forms) with the marks of suffering (ie. the wounds from the nails hammered through Jesus' feet and hands) visible. The initial cathedral brief asked the artist to use four themes:

- the Glory of the Father (light unapproachable);
- Christ in the Glory of the Father (Christ to be shown either standing, sitting, blessing, helping, ruling, giving the sacrament or drawing humanity up to himself);
- the Holy Spirit and the church (represented by some symbols and by the apostles);
- the Heavenly Sphere (represented by angels or saints).

*Provost Howard* told Sutherland that depicting the face of Christ would be difficult: 'Victory, serenity and great compassion will be a great challenge to combine. Just as the Italians boldly conceived an Italian face for Christ and the Spanish a Spanish face, it may come to you to conceive an English face, universal at the same time'.

Throughout his design, Sutherland had to adapt his ideas to meet the requirements of the cathedral. (He indicates the number of conversations and letters which took place in his interview with A Revai). This was especially so in the case of the lower panel. In the end, Sutherland asked for an additional fee (£300-£400) to reflect the extra work he had to do as a consequence of what he felt were differences between the church authorities. He also had to take into account architectural changes. At one

stage, there was to be a reredos. In 1956, Spence decided to use a whitish finish to the walls (instead of sandstone) and this enabled Sutherland to use brighter colours in the Tapestry.

### **Influences on Sutherland**

Sutherland had undertaken a considerable amount of research, using mainly books, for his *Crucifixion*. His work in the tapestry was also influenced by art he saw at first hand:

- Egyptian sculptures in France
- Mosaics in Italy
- The Pantocrator in Greek Orthodox Churches
- Romanesque and early Gothic Cathedrals in France

### **Sources Sutherland Used**

For the head of Christ, Sutherland 'browsed' among sources as varied as Rembrandt and photographs of cyclists.

For the four evangelists, Sutherland made studies of eagles and lions from birds and animals in Maidstone Zoo as well as books. His image of the lion was also influenced by representations in Italy.

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Studies and Sketches**

Many of those that are still in existence can normally be seen at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry (02476 832381)The Herbert Art Gallery also houses the trial weaving of the eagle (displayed in Felletin's village square in January 1959) and provides a double sided A4 information sheet on its Sutherland holdings. The final cartoon is in the Visitors' Centre at Coventry Cathedral. Other sketches are in private collections. Many of the sketches etc., are reproduced in Sutherland and Revai's *Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph*.

### **Cartoons (Maquettes)**

Sutherland produced three (in 1953, 1955 and 1957). Each, at his suggestion, was about 7' high. (ie. about ten percent of the real size).

#### *Cartoon 1*

Christ here was presented, as Sutherland commented, as someone resigned to what was happening. At the base, were three panels with a *pieta* in the middle together with an annunciation on one side and a visitation on the other.

#### *Cartoon 2*

Oil and gouache on board 79½ x 43½"

Christ is seated with his arms outstretched horizontally. There is no mandorla.

The sleeves are large. The chalice is under a pedestal. A human figure stands between Christ's feet. Light flashes from Christ's feet and knees / waist. The base initially had a triptych with a Madonna in the centre; with, on the left, an annunciation, and on the right Michael fighting with the devil. This was then replaced with a crucifixion.

*Cartoon 3*

Oil, gouache and cloth collage on board - 79" x 43¼"

Christ's arms are by his body and raised so that his hands come to his cheeks. He seems to be sitting on a low-backed throne. A vertical patterned line divides his clothes. He is surrounded by a mandorla. At the base is a crucifix.

*Final Cartoon*

Oil, gouache and collage on board 79" x 43¼"

This is very similar to the completed tapestry. (Differences are due to the changes Sutherland had to make to the photographic enlargements made for the weavers).

**Sutherland on Sutherland**

*The Coventry Tapestry* contains an interview/colloquy between Sutherland and Andrew Revai. In it they discussed the processes Sutherland went through in creating the tapestry. Some of the points Sutherland made are set out below:

- his main passion was for presenting the mystery of nature. His creation of a series of religious works was due to his commission from Walter Hussey for the crucifixion in St Matthews, Northampton.
- he described a religious artist as someone who could use his or her abilities to express the doctrines of a religion. Such a person need not belong to the religion (Sutherland himself was Roman Catholic)
- he immersed himself in earlier representations of his theme so that he would be able to set these impressions aside to create a piece of work for his day.
- he intended to be traditional enough for his work to be comprehensible to its viewers.
- throughout his work for the Tapestry he made adjustments as other parts of the original design changed.
- his tapestry was not designed to be seen at its best on entrance but from three quarters down the cathedral (it is unclear whether he means from the tapestry or from the entrance).
- he found it impossible *always* to articulate his reasons for different choices vis-à-vis the tapestry.
- most of the design has a double meaning
- the design is centrifugal in nature
- the sections at the edges needed to be detailed

- the face of Jesus was influenced by many factors (eg Rembrandt, photos of cyclists, Egyptian art) but not, as some thought, by el Greco. He made Jesus bearded after some thought.
- the large image of the ascended Jesus he saw as a figure with life and presence; a concentrated force, slightly remote.
- the figure of Jesus is composed of ovals and squares.
- he achieved balance by not using absolute symmetry in his design
- he tried to avoid using standard heraldic motifs in drawing the four beasts. For him the beasts in Revelation were probably symbols of nature and not signs of the gospel writers.
- the animals can be read from the calf clockwise: the lion is the stable point.
- he connected the crucifixion at the base with the sufferings of those in Buchenwald and elsewhere in the twentieth century.
- for him the mourners at the crucifixion are the congregation. As he had no mourners in the tapestry itself, he could not depict a crucified body which swung (as it does in some Gothic art) because to do so would have destabilised the section.
- the translation of his painting into a tapestry did not affect his painting
- tapestry itself was not his preferred medium in general. He disliked older tapestries. The newer work he had seen (at Madame Cuttoli's) did attract him.
- the weavers followed the Aubusson method of achieving nuances in colour not through graduations but through using patches of different colours.

## **Production of the Tapestry**

### ***Photographic Work***

The relatively small final cartoon had to be enlarged. A Wimbledon photographer, W A Cook, photographed the tapestry and produced horizontal strips which were then blown up. Twenty four strips (39' x 3') were produced.

The definition of these was good but some inconsistencies in scale meant that the process had to be repeated (this time in France). Sutherland had to correct some of the details on the enlarged strips for the weavers.

### ***Weaving***

Spence originally wanted to use the Edinburgh Tapestry Company but his final choice was Pinton Frères in Felletin near Aubusson. Pinton Frères, unlike the Edinburgh Tapestry Company, could weave the tapestry in one piece at 12 stitches to an inch.

The contract required the weavers to follow Sutherland's painting exactly and to the satisfaction of both architect and artist. Sutherland visited the workshops nine times

while the weaving was in progress. He had to amend, and then send, each photographic band. Several sections / eg. the skirt and the hands) had to be redrawn. Madame Marie Cuttoli was artistic director. Twelve weavers were involved. (The three most skilled worked on the figures). They started at the bottom of the tapestry and worked from the back. The photographic bands guided them. A specialist marked in the colours in chalk and the weavers used, also, the final cartoon (which hung in the room) to guide them.

They used probably about 900 colours (sources vary). The nearby river (Creuse) was lime free and so good for fixing colours. After weaving, the slits (between different colours) had to be sewn up.

### ***Completion***

Sutherland wanted to see the completed tapestry after it came off the loom to check it. There was a strong suggestion that the tapestry should go on exhibition in the Louvre (ie in the land where it was woven) but this was neither feasible nor desirable from the Cathedral's perspective. So Sutherland checked the tapestry while it was on the floor. in the Building Trades School at Felletin in February 1962. Berthoud suggests that Sutherland asked for changes to be made (though Jean Pinton had no recollection that this was so).

### ***Hanging***

The tapestry arrived in England in March 1962. The hanging took two days; its squaring another month. Once the tapestry was in place, the organ could be tuned (by Harrisons of Durham).

### **VERDICTS**

- Sutherland himself saw the tapestry only once in Coventry (on 20 August 1962). Reports indicate that he praised the weaving and said to his friends 'Well, it could be worse'.
- In the 60's the Duke of Edinburgh questioned the emphasis on its being the largest tapestry in the world. (A tapestry in Baghdad is larger)
- In 2000, the National Gallery exhibition *Seeing Salvation* included Sutherland's first cartoon of the tapestry. The catalogue comments that the figure of the risen and ascended Christ on the tapestry shows a very clear theology.
  - Christ in glory is above, rather than among, humanity.
  - Christ's suffering is past and finite; he is shown as serene, removed from violence.
  - Christ is shown as a king, rather than an 'ordinary' human being.
  - Christ protects rather than judges humanity.
  - Christ's image points to the Cathedral message of international harmony and peace.
- Bellamy and Downing, summarising work done with Welsh students, approach the tapestry as a resource in a sacred space for reflection on spiritual questions. Included within these, are questions about "'whys" and "hows" of our origins, social relationships, and destiny as groups and individuals'. Though the tapestry uses Christian symbols, people from any religious tradition or none ask such questions. They identify ways of approaching the tapestry:

'a *guide* to the spiritual world described in the biblical Book of Revelation' (chapters 4 & 12);

'a *maze* encouraging the viewer to embark on quests for its centre';

'a *model of space/time*'

Space: They argue that Sutherland created 7 planes in the tapestry. The crucifixion is the plane nearest to the viewer; the dark surrounding the figure of Christ within the mandorla is further away.

Time: They suggest these planes reflect a time line with three major epochs;

'a *picture gallery* for contemplating the diversity of form in nature'.

## GRAHAM SUTHERLAND'S RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS

Sutherland was multi-skilled. He produced etchings and sculptures as well as pictures. Landscapes and portraits constituted much of his work. He was a war artist. Brief notes about his religious paintings other than the tapestry follow.

### **Thorns**

Sutherland began to notice thorn bushes while he was in Pembrokeshire in 1945 and thinking about his commission to paint a *Crucifixion* for St Matthews Church in Northampton. He painted thorns/thorn bushes intensively for two years and intermittently thereafter. The thorns he saw as 'space-encompassing' (ie. marking boundaries). He developed them into his thorn heads.

For him thorns expressed pain. Setting them in positive circumstances accentuated this.

### **Noli me tangere**

Chichester Cathedral 1961 32" x 21" - This depicts Christ climbing stairs and holding up his hand to Mary Magdalen. Just as Titian in his *Noli* gave Jesus a hoe to suggest he was a gardener, so Sutherland used a hat to help the viewer understand different ways of viewing the figure of Jesus.

### **Northampton Crucifixion**

Oil on hardboard 90" x 90" 1946

St Matthew's Church is late Victorian. Walter Hussey, vicar since 1937 and later Dean of Chichester, had already put in place *Madonna and Child* (by Henry Moore) and commissioned Britten & Tippet to produce work for the church's fiftieth anniversary. He invited Sutherland to paint *The Agony in the Garden* because of his expertise as a landscape artist. Sutherland suggested instead the *Crucifixion* as the subject.

Sutherland was influenced by his thorns paintings and by photographs of the concentration camps. The tortured bodies reminded him of the body taken down from the cross. The twisted wasted bodies reminded him of Grunewald crucifixions (and especially of the Isenheim Christ).

Sutherland, a convert to Roman Catholicism, wanted to produce something which was within the church's tradition and easily comprehensible (rather than a more abstract presentation). His crucifixion differs from those current at the time because it showed the suffering of Christ.

When some of the church council were taken aback by this stark presentation, Sutherland explained that he saw suffering of war in the suffering of Christ. Sutherland changed his work in different drawings and sketches, and had to adjust his final version to take into account the sandstone walls and the light after the final

version was hung in November 1946. He went on to do a *Deposition* and a *Weeping Magdalen*.

This (*Crucifixion*) was his first religious commission and first large figure study. It is often said to be the best of his religious works. Possible comparisons to be made with it include Bacon's *Crucifixions* and the crucifixion at the bottom of the Coventry Tapestry.

### **Christ Carrying the Cross**

Oil 6' x 4'6" c.1953

Described as a savage scene with a soldier kicking Christ who falls under the heavy weight of the cross.

### **SOURCES**

Berthoud R (1982) *Graham Sutherland: a Biography* London: Faber and Faber

MacGregor N 2000, '*The Abiding Presence*' in Gabriele Finaldi '*The Image of Christ*' London National Gallery

Sutherland G with Revai A (1964) *A Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph* London: the Pallas Gallery

### **Pamphlets**

*Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph* from Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry

Pinton M J (1962) *Graham Sutherland's Tapestry at Coventry Cathedral* 50p from the Cathedral Bookshop.

### **Note Also**

- (1) Sadgrove M (1995) *A Picture of Faith* - Kevin Mayhew  
(Michael Sadgrove was Precentor at Coventry Cathedral in the 1987-95.  
His book is an extended spiritual reflection on the tapestry).
- (2) Denis Bellamy and Ruth Downing have produced '*Sutherland's Great Tapestry at Coventry a communal network for meditation on notions about nature* using contributions from Welsh students. This is available on the web.