

Paper

Sensing the Sacred: Architecture and Truth in the Work of Père Marie-Alain Couturier

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Summary statement

The Dominican friar and Catholic priest Père Marie-Alain Couturier was co-editor, along with Père Pie-Raymond Régamey, of the French review *L'Art Sacré* from 1937 until his early death in 1954. The aim of the review was simple—to bring about a renewal of sacred art in France. Couturier's influence on the direction of sacred art in France, at least during his lifetime, is recognized in the context of art history. However, his writing seldom crosses over into architectural discourse. A close reading of his personal letters and publications—especially those following his forced sabbatical in North America during World War II—makes clear that his work has significant implications for architectural practice. In Montreal he met the Canadian architect Marcel Parizeau, who expounded on the moral, intellectual, and social issues faced by architecture. Parizeau observed that architects had lost the “sense of what architecture should be.”¹ Through his conversations with Parizeau, Couturier arrived at the understanding that a truly living architecture must protect the happiness of men while also instilling in them “the love of the truth and sincerity of forms.”² What architecture “should be,” then, is a source of love and truth, both socially and aesthetically. It should point toward a better world.

When Couturier returned to France in 1945, he continued to write and speak about sacred art, but he also took on a series of projects that were increasingly architectural, applying to them the same principles he had adopted in North America and now espoused in *L'Art Sacré*. When applied to design, the approach to artistic practice he proposes opens up important possibilities for what architecture could be and how a building should ultimately relate to its users. By unpacking three of the recurring themes in Couturier's writing and their manifestation in his architectural pursuits—sacredness of place at Assy, purity of form at Ronchamp, and the primacy of experience at Vence—this paper will reflect on the great potential Father Couturier saw in modern architecture for restoring our spiritual senses and what that might mean for architectural practice today.

Assy, Place, and Poverty

Couturier strongly emphasized the importance of place in sacred art and architecture. This reflected, on one end, his political ties to the French nationalist movement, and on the other a strong sensitivity to the presence of the Spirit within the physical world. According to Couturier, the commodified art and architecture commissioned by the church in the 19th and early 20th centuries was not capable of communicating to a modern people. These works were empty symbols—timeless, placeless, stripped of meaning, and wholly incapable of moving people to faith. In a 1938 article for *L'Art Sacré*, Couturier pointed toward the work of the young Savoyard architect Maurice Novarina as an antithesis. In his work, Couturier recognized the potential for a modern architecture appropriate to a modern people, built upon regional traditions. He described Novarina's churches as, “a signal example of what sacred art should be... an art common to the

¹ Couturier, Marie-Alain. *Marcel Parizeau: Architecte* (Montreal: Editions de L'Arbre, 1945) 27-28. Translation by the author.

² *Ibid*, 30.

place and time in which one lives.”³ Novarina had adopted a regional modernism that fused local building materials and traditional Savoyard architectural forms with the bold structural moves and reinforced concrete characteristic of modern architecture, which he employed in the design of the Église Notre-Dame du Taut Grâce in Assy. The result was something rooted simultaneously in the 20th century and in its alpine context. By drawing upon regional precedent for its formal language, Novarina’s architecture opens up a line of communication and familiarity between the work and its users.

Ronchamp, Purity, and Poetry

Couturier argued that visual sensitivity had been progressively corrupted in the 20th century. His primary purpose for *L’Art Sacré* was “restoring the sensitivity of the eye” through both a purification and a liberation of the senses. He believed that such a purification of vision could be achieved “by seeing forms which in themselves are pure.”⁴ For Le Corbusier, the presence of pure form in architecture arose from the union of opposites— specifically the meeting of matter and spirit. He argues that this union is the element truly at stake in any work of art or architecture, whose primary function is to provide a ground for the meeting of spirit and matter to occur through the revelation of the poetic moment. At Ronchamp, Le Corbusier uses light to bridge the gap between vision and experience, revealing the pure form at the meeting point of the material and the spiritual. Through the chapel, we see that Couturier’s concept of purity is as much about the perceptible revealing of the form as it is about the form itself. Architecturally, Le Corbusier challenged the role of the building as a static object, opening up instead a reflexive connection between the user and the work.

Vence, Light, and Love

While the revelation of pure form opens up the possibility for interconnection between a building and its users, Couturier’s insistence on the primacy of experience sheds light on the humanistic responsibility of architecture. He embraced the phenomenological principle that our sensual experience is always primary and in fact constitutes our being in the world. As such, sensory experience is absolutely at the core of architecture and its ability to invoke an emotional response in its users, hearkening back to Marcel Parizeau’s belief that it is the responsibility of architecture to “protect and promote... the happiness of men.”⁵ This power of architecture to provide relief and point toward a better world through sensory experience is especially evident at Henri Matisse’s Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence. Matisse used the chapel to extend his ideas about light, color, and the relationships between objects into three dimensions. It is, as Couturier describes it, an infinite space, a space of deep belonging. Further, crafting the chapel was an act of deep love and communion, and this love is conveyed through its use. The experience of love and unity dominates the iconographic program, which holds importance only in its support of the sensory and psychological qualities of worship in the chapel. The ability to affect a user’s experience, in Couturier’s view, imparts the work with its moral obligation. Fundamentally, he believed that architecture must address, in some way, our basic humanness, and he acknowledged that through sensory experience we might gain access to a spiritual and psychological wholeness.

Intended Conclusions

The crisis of faith Father Couturier recognized in the 20th century was ultimately a crisis of truth. It resulted from a failure both of architecture to reveal and of the human senses to be attuned to this revealing. Today, we find ourselves in a world where not much has changed. Our senses, both physical and spiritual, are dulled, and architecture is increasingly reduced to a synthetic,

³ Couturier, Marie-Alain. “Deux églises Savoyards,” *L’Art Sacré*, No 29, May 1938, 117-21.

⁴ Couturier, Marie-Alain. “For the Eyes” in *Sacred Art*, trans. Ryan Granger (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 72.

⁵ Couturier. *Marcel Parizeau*, (1945) 33.

disposable commodity produced primarily for the pleasure of the most elite members of society. It seems that, more and more, we must continue to ask ourselves what architecture should be. Couturier argued that a living architecture should be recognizable within the context of its time and place, it should open up a reflexive connection between the user and the work through the revelation of the poetic moment, and it should accept responsibility for the preservation of our physical and spiritual senses. In light of this, perhaps we must begin not by envisioning a new architecture but by radically re-evaluating how and why we practice. If we accept, to start, that our physical and spiritual senses are essential components of our being human, then our resistance must aim to slowly recover these diminished pieces of our collective humanity. Such a practice springs not from self-interest or economic necessity but from a deep and sincere love of truth and humanity.

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