

WILLIAM SCHICKEL'S 'SALVATION SUITE'

By JOSEPH W. GOETZ

HENRI MATISSE once remarked that all authentic art is religious. That which does not aspire to be religious is not art: It is kitsch, propaganda or advertising. Matisse may have been right, but in recent times much purportedly religious art has been undistinguished. If one were to judge the authenticity of modern apparitions by the aesthetic value of devotional objects spun-off by Lourdes, Fatima or La Salette, the visions themselves would be rejected. Authentic art may invariably be religious art, but religious subject matter is no guarantee that art serving religion will be authentic.

The contemporary Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, puts his finger on the problem. In his masterly work, *Herrlichkeit* (translated under the title, *The Glory of the Lord*), von Balthasar argues that at the heart of the dilemma is the church's loss of understanding of *beauty* as one of the fundamental determinants of *being*—those the scholastic philosophers called "transcendentals." By con-

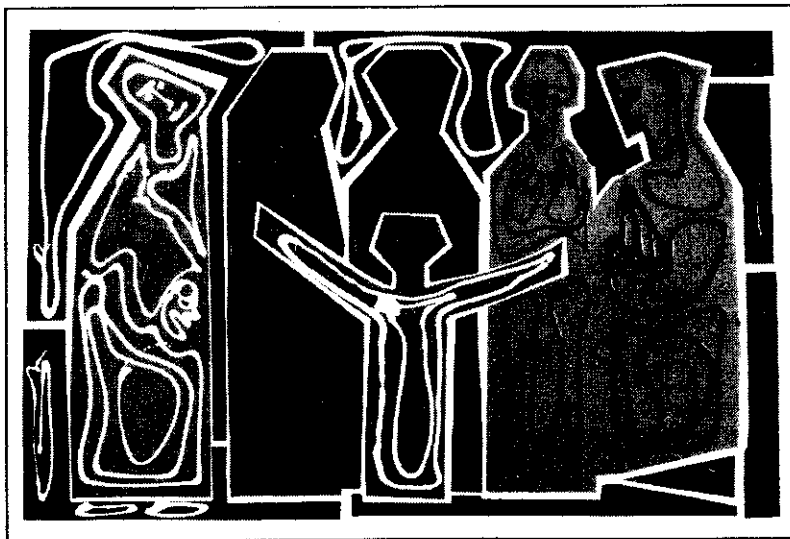
trast, the ancient and medieval worlds refused to understand themselves without the "disinterestedness" of beauty. Now the traditional consciousness of beauty—as woven into the warp and woof of being—is obscured in our world of interests, avarice and sadness. As von Balthasar puts it: "No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to us."

Indeed, according to von Balthasar, the

church no longer dares to believe in beauty and makes of it mere appearance, in order the more easily to dispose of it. The results, aesthetically, are church buildings with all the spatial mystery of shopping malls. A new Eucharistic prayer is said to have been rejected by church leaders on the grounds that it is "too poetic." If beauty is no more than appearance, then the cheap, the prosaic and the tacky will suffice, and art in the service of the church is reduced to propaganda.

The good news is that even if von Balthasar is right and the church has abandoned beauty as a transcendental, artists have not. And he is right to argue that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness.

One brave artist is William Schickel. Based in a village on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Schickel has mirrored something of the spirit of William Morris and company in the sheer variety and originality of his approaches to ecclesiastical and secular design projects. Trained as both sculptor and painter, he turned first to



JESUS AMONG THE LEISERS

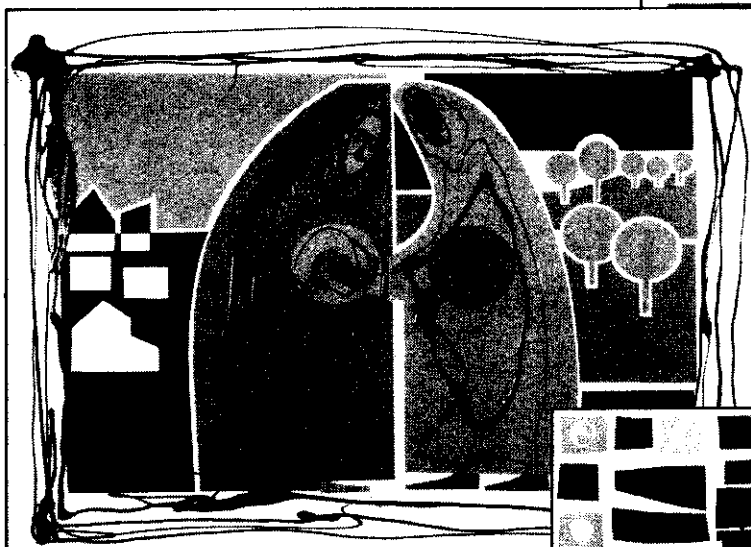
stained glass as a medium in which to embody his convictions about the nature of truth, goodness and beauty.

Though he never wholly put painting aside, Schickel has devoted significant time to it only in recent years. His current work is a series he calls "Salvation Suite." (The title is not altogether felicitous, conjuring up, as it does, a celestial hostelry.) The work is a collection of 11 graphic works, part serigraph, part spontaneous



JESUS AMONG THE CHILDREN

A traveling exhibit of William Schickel's 'Salvation Suite' will be at St. James Cathedral, Brooklyn, N.Y., from Oct. 17 to Nov. 8. Photographs of artwork © 1986 William Schickel.

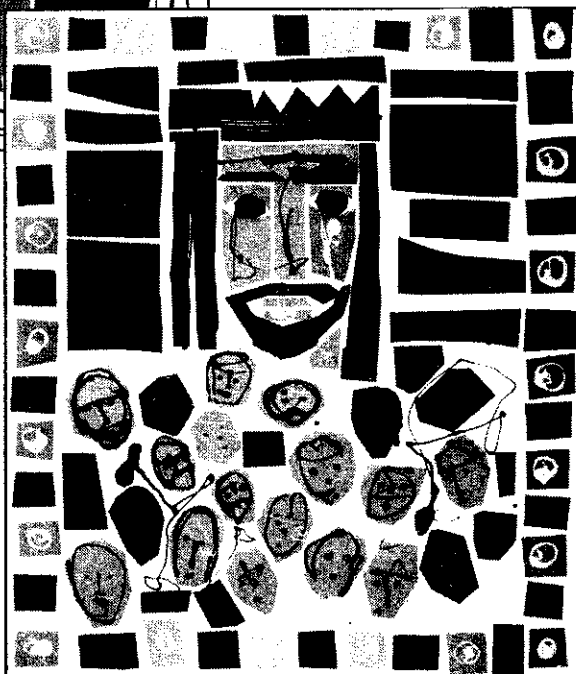


VISITATION

drawing with enamel paint; the subject is moments from the Christian mystery. Schickel's long experience with stained glass is doubly revealed: by the grid-like patterns, similar to the armature linking the pieces of glass, serigraphed to serve as a ground for the specific images and by the intensity of the enamel paint with which, through spontaneous drawing-dripping, the image is realized.

The artist, in a mood reminiscent of the poet A. E. Housman, said of this work: "It has taken me longer to do these paintings than any other work I have done. When I was 20, I was too old to do them. When I was 30, I was too serious to attempt such trivial work. When I was 40, I didn't have sufficient skill or know how. Now in my 60's, I am finally young enough, playful enough, and sure enough to do them."

They are the first explicitly iconic work done in a long time by a significant American artist. They join a long tradition, commencing with Giotto's Arena Chapel, in which a narrative series on the Christian



PAROUSIA

mystery unfolds, picture by picture. As with other "suites," each picture can stand alone, but their powerful individuality is enhanced and strengthened when seen together—not unlike Mark Rothko's remarkable stations of the cross in Dallas. If there

and settings, theological investigations, and—most of all—for offering guidance for our living and being in the world. Von Balthasar expresses it powerfully: "We can be sure that whoever sneers at [beauty's] name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love." ■

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