

Twentieth Century Grünewald: Reclaiming Graham Sutherland for Christian Art

James McCullough

For a magazine article published in 1951, Graham Sutherland wrote:

People have said that my most typical images express a dark and pessimistic outlook. That is outside my feeling. In the sense which I have previously mentioned, the precarious tension of opposites – happiness and unhappiness, beauty and ugliness, so near the point of balance – are capable of being interpreted according to the predilections and needs of the beholder – with enthusiasm and delight, or abhorrence, as with the taste of bitter-sweet fruit.¹



Thorn Trees, 1945 (oil on canvas), Sutherland, Graham (1903-80)
British Council, London, UK
The Bridgeman Art Library

Sutherland was in the 1930's through the 60's a major, at some points the major, figure in British art. His public prominence began with his expressive landscapes which were successfully exhibited in the late 1920's through the 1930's, rising again in a series of wartime artwork sponsored by the Imperial War Museum. His turn toward privately commissioned works, his explicitly religious works and his series of highly publicized portraits, marked both the apex as well as the beginning of his decline in critical reviews, being increasingly eclipsed by his long-time friend and eventual rival Francis Bacon. Compared to Bacon's, Sutherland's personal life was remarkably free of scandal or strangeness. Married for over fifty years to his wife Kathleen, through whom came about his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Sutherland approached his art as a disciplined and proficient workman.² Evidence supports the impression that his faith was genuine albeit of a quiet, underscored expression. An infrequent churchgoer, he nonetheless acknowledged his faith publicly and, as I will argue, sought both theological and aesthetic integrity in his work.³

Sutherland's work, in both its implicit and explicit religious modes, raises interesting questions about the relationship between art and its potential effect on the faith and formation of viewers. This article will focus primarily on his rendering of the Crucifixion for a church in Northampton, England, shortly after the Second World War, as well as relevant paintings leading up to and following this painting. Some brief reflections on the ways that art draws the attention and affections of viewers will conclude with a commendation of Sutherland's work for a new generation.

Sutherland began his artistic career in etching, producing a number of executions of landscape themes, subject matter that he subsequently explored as he moved into oil painting. Sutherland freely acknowledged his indebtedness to the English Romantic tradition of William Blake, Samuel Palmer, JMW Turner and contemporaries Paul Nash and Henry Moore.⁴ The influence of Samuel Palmer is very clear in Sutherland's early landscape work, and starting in 1934 with visits to Pembrokeshire, a rural coastal area in south Wales, Sutherland began a series of vividly original landscapes and paintings based on organic forms such as tree limbs, roots and other such natural "found objects".⁵

Sutherland's usage of organic forms highlights his association with the Surrealist Movement, although he was primarily connected to English Neo-Romanticism. As Martin Hammer writes, Sutherland from the mid-1930's,

...had become obsessed by the possibility of extracting strange, hidden motifs from the countryside, as a vehicle for projecting disquieting, metamorphic imagery in the resulting pictures.⁶

All of these influences are brought to bear in Sutherland's mature work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

1. Graham Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," first published in *The Listener*, 6 September 1951, in Michael Hammer, *Graham Sutherland: Landscapes, War Scenes, Portraits, 1924-1950*, London: Scala Pub., 2005, p. 145.
2. For insight both into his work habits and his conversion to Catholicism, see Robert Melville, "Graham Sutherland," in Hammer, p. 170-71.
3. Of his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, Roger Berthoud describes the social and intellectual context of the mid to late 1920's. Several of Sutherland's friends and acquaintances had converted, and the writings of Chesterton, Belloc, and those of the Oxford Movement were acknowledged as influences. His courtship of Kathleen Barry, a committed Catholic, was a strong influence; *Graham Sutherland: A Biography*, London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 52-59.

Sutherland's *Crucifixion* for St. Matthew's Church in Northampton, England, is dated 1946, and the context of this work is worth reviewing. The European war ended in May of 1945. Sutherland had been in close proximity with the sufferings the war unleashed as a commissioned war artist. But it was not until afterwards, in late 1945 into 1946, that the full extent of the Nazi concentration camp and extermination programs were fully revealed. It is clear that there was a kind of synchronistic relationship between Sutherland's absorbing and responding to current events and the commission that now afforded him an opportunity to find a means to express the cruelty of humanity and the potential of its redemption.⁷

There are two major sources for Sutherland's iconography of the Crucifixion. The first was the celebrated *Isenheim Altarpiece* by the artist known as Matthias Grünewald. As late as 1974, while receiving the Shakespeare Prize for outstanding work in British arts and letters, Sutherland paid tribute to his lifelong admiration for German art, including that of Dürer, Altdorfer, Cranach, and Grünewald.⁸ "I respect him, perhaps more than any other, and rank him among the greatest painters of all time."⁹ The connections are not difficult to see. Both employ physical distortion in order to heighten expressionistic effect. Both seek to project an image of suffering. Both depict Christ *post mortem*. Both advance the Western tradition of using the crucifixion as a means of portraying a theology of Christ's identification with suffering humanity. For Grünewald, the immediate context was that of the hospital run by members of the Order of St. Anthony, which served among others sufferers of what was then called St. Anthony's Fire, the result of ingesting poisoned rye which produced painful and disfiguring sores on the body. Scholars have come to see that Grünewald was not merely experimenting with new techniques of painting, but rendering Jesus in a way that identified His suffering with these sufferers in their disfiguring agonies.¹⁰

Likewise Sutherland sought to portray this identification in his own historical context. Sutherland had already been immersed in the sufferings of the Second World War as a commissioned artist for the War Museum. But in late 1945 he was sent a copy of a newly published document put together by the American military:



The Crucifixion, 1946 (oil on hardboard), Sutherland, Graham (1903-80)
Saint Matthew's Church, Northampton, Northamptonshire, UK
The Bridgeman Art Library

4. William Boyd, *Graham Sutherland*, London: Bernard Jacobson Limited, 1993, p. 1. For the influence of Palmer and Blake on Sutherland's development and his relationship with English Neo-Romanticism see Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and Their Times*, London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001.

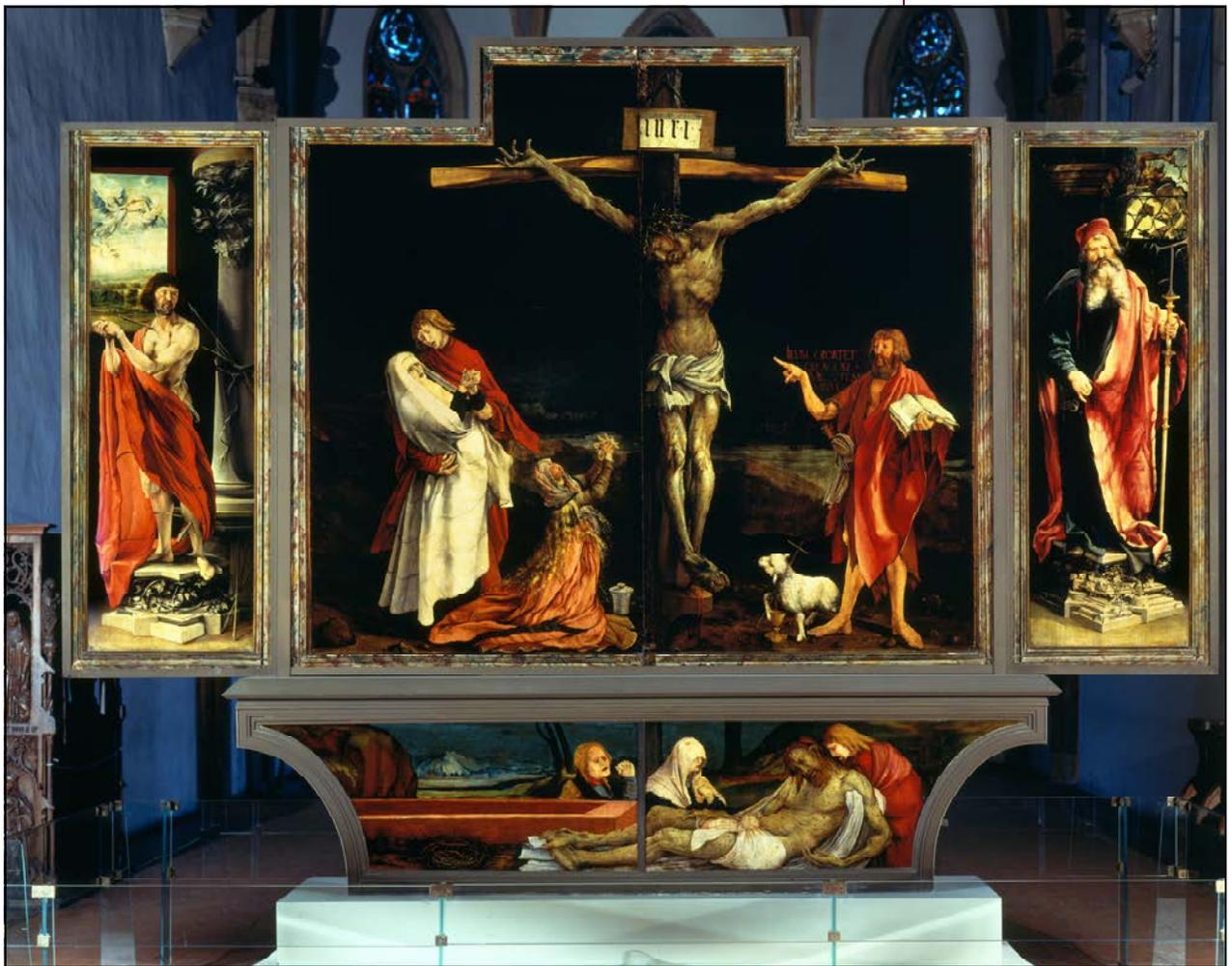
5. Berthoud p. 76ff.

6. Hammer, p. 40.

I remember receiving a black-covered American Central Office of Information book dealing with the [concentration] camps. It was a kind of funeral book. In it were the most terrible photographs of Belsen, Auschwitz and Buchenwald. These photographs were to have a great effect on me; I saw them just before I received a commission to paint a Crucifixion – in them many of the tortured bodies looked like figures deposed from crosses. The whole idea of the depiction of Christ crucified became much more real to me after having seen this book and it seemed to be possible to do this subject again. In any case the continuing beastliness and cruelty of mankind, amounting at times to madness, seems eternal and classic.¹¹

7. He discusses his exposure to the camps in Hammer p. 105. For a fuller account of Sutherland's commission for the painting and his struggle with its theme, see Graham Howes, *The Art of the Sacred*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, p. 59-74.

8. Hammer, p. 291.



Grünewald, Mathias (1455-1528). *Isenheim altarpiece: Crucifixion*. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Martin Hammer draws a connection between Sutherland's depiction of Christ and the poetry of his contemporary, David Gascoyne. Only four years previously Sutherland had provided illustrations for a compellation of Gascoyne's poetry. This collection includes a poem entitled "Ecce Homo" which begins:

Whose is this horrifying face,
This putrid flesh, discoloured, flayed,
Fed on by flies, scorched by the sun?
Whose are these hollow red-filmed eyes
And thorn-spiked head and spear-struck side?
Behold the Man: He is Man's Son.¹²

The St. Matthew's *Crucifixion* received some contemporary criticism as insufficiently portraying the hope represented by the Cross. Two things should be borne in mind. First, Sutherland originally intended for the painting to have a lighter, sky blue background. For him, such a colour represented hope, and would have more clearly intimated the hope of the Resurrection. But contingencies related to the church interior necessitated Sutherland's adopting a more somber purple-blue background.¹³

Secondly, Sutherland operated with what appears to be an understanding of the message implicitly present in the image of the Crucifixion. Sutherland wrote,

The Crucifixion idea interested me because it has a duality which has always fascinated me. It is the most tragic of all themes *yet inherent in it is the promise of salvation*. It is the symbol of the precarious balanced moment, the hair's breadth between black and white. It is that moment when the sky seems superbly blue – and, when one feels it is only blue in that superb way because at any moment it could be black – there is the other side of the mirror – and on that point of balance one may fall into great gloom or rise to great happiness.¹⁴

The resulting image is one that combines Sutherland's ability to create "disquiet, metamorphic" imagery drawn from encounters with nature and the disturbing realities captured in the photographs fresh from the liberated concentration camps. Christ in Sutherland's painting takes on the shape both of twisted thorns and emaciated victims of genocide. The painting remains where it was first unveiled to mixed reactions on 18 November, 1946, in the south transept of this Anglican church in Northampton, directly opposite the equally controversial *Madonna and Child* (1944) of the sculptor Henry Moore.

Sutherland's St. Matthew *Crucifixion*, as well as subsequent works portraying explicitly Christian themes¹⁵, raises questions at the heart of theological encounter with the arts. For example, how can religious art be assessed and analyzed in relation to how it intentionally or unintentionally affects the spiritual orientation of the viewer? One might think of these as two axes along which religious art assumes an orientation.

9. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, notes accompanying Plate 8.

10. See Brown, p. 351.

11. G. Sutherland, "Images Wrought from Destruction," Hammer, p. 105.

12. David Gascoyne, *Poems 1937-1942*, illustrations by Graham Sutherland, London: Nicholson and Watson, PL Editions, 1943, p. 5.

13. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," Hammer, p. 144-45.

14. *Ibid*, p. 144.

15. This would include the *Crucifixion* (1947), the *Thorn Cross* (1955), the *Crucifixion* for St. Aidan's Church (1959), the *Noli Me Tangere* (1961) and most spectacularly the *Christ in Glory* tapestry for the reconstructed Coventry Cathedral (1962).

The first, particularly relevant in modern religious art, is that of the *particular* and of the *universal*. Twentieth century Christianity tended to seek validation of its message by highlighting its universal implications and accessibility. This tension between the particular and the universal is reflected in corresponding artwork. Francis Bacon, although not a religious believer, serves as an example. Bacon abstracts the Crucifixion from its Christian particularity and employed it as a vehicle for portraying general human suffering, affliction, and ultimate meaninglessness. His of course is perhaps an extreme example, but it illustrates this approach. David Gascoyne's poem cited above serves as another such example. Jesus is referred to as "Man's Son" and we are described later in the poem as "callous contemporaries of the slow/Torture of God." These are the characteristics of a universalizing depiction of the meaning of Christ's Cross.¹⁶

In the St. Matthew's *Crucifixion*, Sutherland set out to render the image "immediately intelligible and within the tradition," a statement which would seem to apply to all of his commissioned religious works.¹⁷ Sutherland sought to retain the particularity of the subject matter, while communicating contemporary relevance. To his startled first viewers at St. Matthew's Church, Sutherland, "soon won them over by describing how he wanted to try to sum up the agony and suffering of the war in the agony and suffering of Christ."¹⁸ Sutherland appeals to the particularities of Christianity in order to explore the universal experience of inhumanity, or put another way, a universal experience is summed-up in a particular instance.

A second axis of theological assessment of art involves contrasting orientations of *immanence* and *transcendence*. Martin Hammer's observation of the primacy of nature in Sutherland's work provides a helpful clue in this regards. In Sutherland's art, organic objects assume human proportions, and human figuration takes on the appearance of organic forms. Sutherland's best work invites viewers to perceive nature and natural objects in a new, if perhaps melancholic light. That gift applied to the explicitly religious works that similarly invites new apprehension of traditional themes.¹⁹

Seen in this light, Sutherland's work tends towards the immanent dimension of God's relationship with the world; of God's presence, particularly within the natural world. Spirituality here involves the capacity to perceive God's *implicit presence* in the world around us. Sutherland several times described his as a "pantheistic" vision, although one should be careful of pressing this word for precise definition beyond his apprehension, expressed through his work, of an almost supernatural effervescence in nature, and of parabolic motifs found within it.

This helps explain the power of his St. Matthew's *Crucifixion*. Here is a sense of the deep identification of Christ *with* suffering humanity. It rightfully bears comparison with Grünewald's Altarpiece, and indeed translates

16. David Brown has reflected on this tendency in twentieth century art: The advantage of such usage is that, even in a period of decline in explicit religious belief, the use of what was once explicit religious imagery can still throw up questions of meaning and significance. The disadvantage, though, is that such imagery no longer immediately feeds into Christian belief and practice as a way of deepening the believer's engagement with the story. [p. 369].

17. Berthoud, p. 127.

18. Ibid, p. 128.

19. Yorke succinctly suggests that "One might deduce from Sutherland's work that he was obsessed by cruel forms in a hostile world" (p. 135). David Brown explores the historical, aesthetic and practical dimensions of immanence and transcendence in art in *God and Enchantment of Place*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 37-83.

Grünwald's medieval expressionism into the war-torn twentieth in a fitting and convincing manner. It is for this reason, conversely, that some find Sutherland's large-scale Coventry Tapestry (1962) a less successful work. The theme of the tapestry, *Christ in Glory*, is one which emphasizes Christ's transcendence and this, one could argue, was not Sutherland's native religious language. Sutherland's works most successfully exegete God's presence within the human drama, doing so with strong reference to his own contemporary historical context.

A final point of theological reflection involves the question of how a work of art might advance a viewers' engagement with the subject matter, or in terms of practical theology, how art might promote spiritual formation. Here I will restrict my brief comments to the St. Matthew's *Crucifixion*.

The image of Jesus on the Cross alone, without any surrounding figures, derives in part from the Western tradition of the Man of Sorrows and the more general trend beginning in the seventeenth century of focusing solely on Christ alone. In the medieval period, such imagery was used to promote a more direct engagement of the viewer with Christ, to recognize His sufferings, to sorrow over them, and to identify with them.²⁰

While Sutherland's image accords with his desire to "remain within the tradition," having Christ portrayed in such a manner participates in the process toward thematic abstraction and the more universalistic orientation with which it is associated. Nonetheless, with its traditional iconography of Christ and its setting behind a church altar, Sutherland's painting remains rooted within the Christian framework and its particularistic meaning. The "precarious tension," the aesthetic value Sutherland frequently alludes to serves here to root viewers within the Biblical frame of reference while inviting them to consider for themselves Christ's suffering *in* the world as well as *for* the world. It invites contemplation on the Christ of history as well as the Christ Who continues to identify with "the least of these" who suffer affliction.

In an interview with Sutherland, critic Robert Melville approached the delicate subject of Sutherland's faith and how it affected his work. Melville wrote:

My question was not really an attempt to find out something about his private life. It arose out of a strong feeling that his art does in fact express a religious attitude, although it rarely proclaims itself in symbols.²¹

Sutherland's religious language, emphasizing the Divine Presence within the world, reflects back upon those decisive influences of the English Romantic tradition. A sincerity of faith, respect for and knowledge of the Christian Tradition, integrity of craft, and artistic originality come through in works that commend renewed appreciation on a broad scale.²²

20. Richard Harries, *The Passion in Art*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004 p. 86. Harries provides a brief but effective background on the Man of Sorrows image and the image of Jesus along on the Cross, pp. 85-57, 101-02.

21. Melville, "Graham Sutherland, in Hammer, p. 171.

22. Sutherland himself summarized the possibility of his art:

In any case the painter is a kind of blotting paper; he soaks up impressions – goes through 'periods of fullness and evacuation' as Picasso has said; and is very much part of the world. He cannot therefore avoid soaking up the implications of the outer chaos of twentieth century civilization. By that token tragic pictures will be painted – subconsciously perhaps, and with necessarily having a tragic subject. Picasso himself during the war painted tragic "still lives." Maybe one can only "mutter in darkness – spirit sore." But one has in one's hand the instruments of transformation and redemption. Sutherland, "Thoughts on Painting," in Hammer, p. 145.