



Mark Lancelot Symons

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Introduction

Mark Lancelot Symons (1886–1935) was an English painter born in Hampstead in London and a resident of London and the English home counties his entire life. He regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art between 1913 and 1935. A devout Roman Catholic, Symons painted in an aesthetic inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with favoured subjects including idealized childhood, fairies, and religious themes. For the brief period between 1930 and his death in 1935, Symons was considered among the most controversial artists active in Britain, having made a series of modern-dress religious subject paintings that led to allegations of sensationalism and even blasphemy in the popular press. Symons was concurrently working on what would become one of his last major paintings and a manifesto of his beliefs: a millenarian image of the earthly paradise.

Life and work

Symons was the oldest of nine children and first cousin twice removed to the decadent poet Arthur Symons. The children were raised in a pious household. His father, the artist William Christian Symons, converted to Catholicism in 1870; his mother was similarly devout. After demonstrating an interest in art, Mark Symons became a pupil of John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), a friend of his father, before studying at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1905 to 1909. On the completion of his studies, he decided to dedicate his life to the church and intended to become a priest or enter a monastery in an enclosed contemplative order, specifically the Carthusians. Art fell by the wayside, and Symons placed strict food restrictions upon himself in preparation for the ascetic lifestyle. His biographer Stephanie Wines (1937) records that the 'exaggerated attention he was giving to his food became most disturbing' (9). This disordered eating would appear to have damaged his heart, reputedly rendering him unfit for the priesthood. It also likely saved his life, sparing him from service in the Great War until he was called up in November 1918. Such was the fate of his younger brother James Antony, a student at the Royal Academy of the Art, who was killed in action on 18 July 1916 aged 21.

Symons was an early member of the Book-Barrow Brigade, a missionary group and an offshoot of the Catholic Reading Guild that was formed in the early 1910s. The group was named after the wheelbarrows

in which its members carried and attempted to sell the penny pamphlets of the Catholic Truth Society (Browne 1921, 10). Symons had spent much of the war's duration serving as a missionary with the Catholic Truth Society in central London. He was elected to the council of the newly formed Catholic Evidence Guild in 1918 and continued working for the Guild until 1924. Symons was among the lay preachers who represented the Guild at Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park (Browne 1921, 18). He became the second master of the Catholic Evidence Guild in its elections of 1920, resigning in 1922 at the end of his statutory two-year term.

Symons was unresolved about joining the Carthusians or perhaps another order when, in 1924, he had the chance to meet with Constance Gerber (1891-1979), who had been preparing to enter a convent. They married in December that year and adopted three children via the Knights of St Columba: Molly, Mary-Margaret, and Anne (Jacqui Kirsch, pers. comm., November 2020). Constance encouraged Symons to start painting again in earnest and, from 1925 to 1935, he exhibited annually at the Royal Academy of Art. He went on to become a founding member of the Reading Guild of Artists in 1930. He advocated decentralizing culture and actively promoted regional schools of art and culture, considering these to be of greater benefit to the general populace (Wines 1937, 44).

Early examples of his artwork from this period included devotional paintings that are characterized by a shallow pictorial space and staging evocative of Byzantine iconography, albeit painted with an attention to detail, simplicity of line, and vivid palette reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. However, an acute religious message characterized his most publicized later works. He came to prominence in the popular press in 1930 with the exhibition of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?* The title is a quotation of the American plantation hymn 'Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)'. The modern-day depiction of the Crucifixion is a tangle of figures with a shallow depth. Symons justified the contemporary setting:

The crucifixion was Christ's sacrifice for men of all Ages ... I had no idea what the Jewish crowd of 2000 years ago was like, so I painted a crowd that might be found in London. Every face in the portrait is some one I know or have seen in streets and 'buses. ('Royal Academy' 1930, 45)

Critics called the subject 'pure sensationalism', suggesting that:

[The] twentieth-century mob of soldiers and operatives, curious or incurious according to their personality, has for its spiritual ancestry the Elder Breughel's preoccupation with crowds, and some of the bitter character drawing of Hieronymous [sic] Bosch, but it is only a shadow of a shadow. Stripped of its headline appeal, which is considerable, the painting as a painting is nothing. (Fincham 1930, 11)

A writer in *Liturgical Arts* alleged the figures 'run the gamut of human emotions from the brutal, bestial delight at the spectacle, through cynical interest, indifference, fear and doubt, to an outright realization of its significance' ('Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?' 1943, 83). The *Daily Herald* captioned a reproduction with the question, 'Do we not crucify Christ every day with our blatant disregard for His teaching?' (Lansbury 1932, 8). Iris Conlay (1960) later identified that this 'headline appeal' was due to

Symons's emphasis that 'Christ was not killed by others in the past but by themselves in their own home-town, today' (3).

The work set a pattern for Symons's subsequent submissions to the Academy, which commonly included large-format religious-subject paintings set within the modern context, often with explicit indictments of modern society, rich in literary allusions, and using his own modern aesthetic, which combined the Pre-Raphaelite influence with Mannerism's technical flourishes and aptitude for distorting form. In 1931 Symons's painting *My Lord I Meet in Every London Lane and Street* was rejected by the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition hanging committee. It was reproduced in the press, which anticipated that Symons would again be at the centre of controversy ('My Lord I Meet in Every London Lane and Street' 1931, 46-47; 'R. A. Surprise Picture' 1931, 9). The title was taken from the 1893 poem 'The Second Crucifixion' by the English author Richard Le Gallienne. The poem provides an exposition of the painting; it contrasts Christ's presence to the faithful author with the sins of modern humanity that repeat the Crucifixion. The Royal Academy went on to reject *The Last Supper* for exhibition in 1933; the depiction of Christ and his disciples featured Symons in the place of Judas Iscariot. His reputation as problem painter and sensation-monger was apparently confirmed with another work that was accepted for exhibition at the Academy that year. *In the Streets of the Great City (Rev. XI)* (1933) uses dramatic *chiaroscuro* and radical foreshortening to produce a dramatic and claustrophobic interpretation of the Crucifixion. The title references Revelation 11:8: 'Their dead bodies shall lie on the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified' (King James Version). Symons provided a critique of contemporary society when discussing the artwork, alleging:

There is a veil a refinement over modern civilisation, a quantity even of kindness, but below an immense amount of positive rebellion against God ... spiritually Our Lord is crucified to-day. In places like Russia and Mexico, in the person of His followers He is crucified in the flesh in that they suffer violent persecution ...

It is the desire of men to get the happiness which life may afford without obeying God. 'This is the heir, let us kill him and the inheritance shall be ours.' (quoted in Wines 1937, 40)

Figures are egregiously distorted. Wines (1937, 57) indicates that these are physical manifestations of their fallen condition and moral character, describing Symons's

grief that men, heedless of their magnificent past ... went after mean and ugly things. He painted a picture of a row of hideous old people being resurrected into the glorious bodies of children. It hurt him to see people ... with old and twisted faces, marred by harsh thoughts, discontent or worldly cares.

For the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in 1934, Symons submitted *The Earthly Paradise*, a painting that he had been at work on since June 1927. The depiction of the millennium is divided into two distinct yet contiguous areas: a vibrant, colourful paradise populated with children occupies the inner tondo

region, while the sepia-toned world of adults (the fallen world) is relegated to the fringes. According to Wines (1937), *The Earthly Paradise* (1927–34) was a ‘very significant ... revelation of his thought. Towards the end of his life, especially, he was very much occupied with the idea of an earthly Paradise and the Millennium’ (53). The *Illustrated London News* reproduced the painting with Symons’s explanation (‘Royal Academy, 1934’ 1934, 692–93):

Historic Christianity ... teaches that the Earthly Paradise is not a dream but a fact. We did originate there, by sin lost it, and will end there (see Revelation). My picture in an allegorical manner illustrates this fact, with the complementary idea, ‘Blessed are the little Children, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Hence, too, Christ is there, as a child. One procession is of children, another of grown people. Angels are present in shining white garments. The newcomers, outside among the ruins of ‘men’s Babylons,’ are ordinary sinful men and women. At the top is a quotation from that wonderful book, ‘The Satin Slipper,’ by Paul Claudel.

The indictments of prior works take specific meaning with this canvas. Wines (1937) observes that for Symons ‘it was not man’s feet ... which had been driven from Eden, but his heart, and if the heart’s sight had not been deformed by sin he would behold this lovely world’ (55). Symons’s philosophy stems from Matthew’s Gospel (Wines 1937, 57) and, in particular, 18:3: ‘Except ye ... become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven’ (KJV). For Symons, the innocence of children allows them to see the true paradise; it is available to anyone if they too become as a child. The didactic calls for reformation inherent in his prior critiques go hand in hand with this later call to purify oneself; the benefit is to bear witness to the kingdom that is already present around us (Bromwell 2019, 201–12).

Symons’s premature death at the age of 48 in 1935 placed the family in financial hardship. His blithe attitude to what happened to his paintings (with art being secondary to religion in his mind) meant many have since been lost; many other works failed to sell, both in his lifetime and after his death. Constance stored a number of paintings under her bed until her death in 1972, after which they were disseminated among the three adopted daughters. Symons’s legacy has been accordingly limited; retrospective exhibitions in 1936 and 1979 at Reading Museum and Art Gallery sustained interest in him, while his paintings have continued to regularly feature in group exhibitions. It is fair to say that he has been overshadowed by his immediate contemporary, Stanley Spencer, with whom he shared an intense Christian faith and a belief in the importance of human agency in realizing the earthly paradise.

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