

An Appreciation of the Murals | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961

AN APPRECIATION OF THE MURALS

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH is very nearly unique among edifices of its size in the richness of its interior. This is due to a fortunate combination of circumstances. When the church was built Nutley had an unusual number of artists for the relatively small community it then was. Living in The Enclosure during those years were, among others, Albert Sterner, Fred Dana Marsh, Arthur Hoeber, Charles W. Hawthorne and Guy Pene duBois. And there were cultivated laymen who were friends of the artists and appreciated them, men such as William Harris Arnold, Lyman Nichols and Henry W. Goodrich. There was a church newly completed, whose bare walls, handsomely divided into horizontal spaces by wooden arches and beams, seemed specially designed for mural decoration. And finally, Nutley was fortunate in having as a resident a young English painter, Clinton Balmer, a fine and sensitive mind, at home in poetry, music and the great tradition of art, an artist who was a poet in paint.

How these unusual circumstances were brought together to create the murals of Grace Church is delightfully told by Edgar Sergeant from Mr. Balmer's first-hand memory and his own. It is a remarkable story of imaginative, enterprising individuals working together for a common end—generous laymen who made possible a major mural project, and a gifted artist who met them more than halfway. Speaking personally, I remember the enthusiasm with which my father and his friends followed and encouraged the progress of the work, and the pleasure of seeing the paintings grow in Mr. Balmer's studio and later take their places on the walls of the church.

Clinton Balmer's murals belong in the tradition of Venetian painting, when mural art reached its greatest fullness of color and tone. They present a sequence of those great scenes from the Old and New Testaments which have attracted painters since the Middle Ages. They tell their stories clearly, poetically, and with warmth and tenderness. They are conceived not only as representations of these events, but in terms of their visual language of color, line and design. Their style combines a loving elaboration of figures and actions, richness and depth of color and a fine decorative sense. Clinton Balmer was always aware of the architectural forms which framed his works and of the flatness of the surface which he was modeling and enriching. He avoided on the one hand, producing enlarged illustrations which would not hold their place on the walls, and on the other hand, the decorative mannerisms too common among mural painters. He carried his color and tonal values to a richness equal to that of easel painting, while still making his murals integral parts of the architectural interior. Each painting is a complete and satisfying composition, but is related to its neighbors and to the entire plan. Thus Grace Church presents that rare achievement, the unifying of mural art and architecture into a harmonious whole.

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