

# COMMENTARY ON THE WORK – “JESUS OF ADVENT”

By Arthur Aswell Rowe

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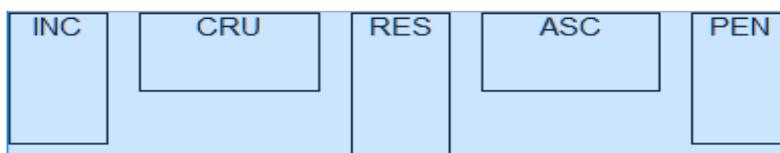
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## ADVENT

The five canvasses depicting the advent of Jesus in history were painted not for the primary purpose of theological exposition. Simultaneously they represent a venture into that realm of aesthetics concerned with visual form and colour. The paintings were done in the chronological sequence of the events portrayed. Thus beginning at the left is the Incarnation followed by the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost at the right:-



Across the five canvasses from left to right there is a progressive change in mood and character from dark to light and from sensuous to spiritual. The location of each event, likewise, moves to the right from the nativity at the left side on the Incarnation (950h x 700w) canvas; to the cross, left of centre on the Crucifixion (700h x 950w) canvas; to the head napkin in the tomb at the centre on the Resurrection(1000h x 750w) canvas; to the ascending figure at the right of centre on the Ascension (700h x 950w) canvas; and then to the house (or place) at the right side on the Pentecost (950h x 700w) canvas. The Incarnation, Resurrection and Pentecost canvasses are aligned vertically with height greater than width to accord with the idea of dynamic Spirit activity reaching into the world of humankind. The Resurrection canvas is a little larger in height and width than the other equally sized canvasses because of the reliance of the Christian faith on the validity of the Resurrection. An interesting alternative way of arranging the canvasses is:-

	PEN	
CRU	RES	ASC
	INC	

The physical act of applying the paint to the canvas was effected by a combination of conscious design and inspired spontaneity, now one now the other being in control. Whether the spontaneous elements are a subconscious arrangement of one's memory data or inflow from an inspirational source in another dimension is a moot point. Perhaps they are the same thing. Many of the elements of composition were patent from the outset; others acquired significance as they developed; some assumed meaning after completion. No claim is made for a concise formulated approach and there may be blurrings, weak presentations and irrelevant elements in the paintings. One should guard against the temptation to pin a meaning to every detail in a composition. The overall idea is to express the work of the Creator Spirit in the created world presented in aesthetically pleasing visual terms.

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## **THE INCARNATION**

See at the bottom of the painting the Creator Spirit "moving upon the face of the waters" so to speak. Skip over the thousands of millions of years of stellar evolution; the formation of the planets; the emergence of life upon Earth; and the upward struggle of human kind. Now look at Earth at DC-0-AD. Rome had built roads which facilitated inter urban travel and communication. Greece was a centre of intellectual and aesthetic activity. Palestine paid homage to a monotheistic deity. These phenomena are symbolized respectively by inserts of the Colosseum, the Parthenon and the ancient Hebrew temple. It was as if humankind was ready for the next advance in the Creator's plan. Like one who has gathered materials, built and prepared a house and then moves in to make a home, so the Spirit takes occupation in its creation in the form of a human child. Since the wedding of the spirit and the flesh was a unique event in space and time it was fitting that it should have a unique character. What could be more appropriate than a virgin birth. This is reflected on the upper part of the painting in pure intuitive composition which inevitably expresses itself in forms feminine. The stable scene is at the left side of the painting with the departing shepherds and wise men portrayed briefly in close proximity. Of interest

is the spontaneous composition around the temple. In form it resembles an altar and locked into it adjacent to the temple is a compositional element similar to the stable scene. This seems, somehow, to symbolize the Messianic utterances of the Old Testament. The familiar trappings of the nativity have been reduced to a minimum and free imaginative treatment given to the Incarnation aspect. One can never hope to capture the delicacy and fragile beauty of this gracious miracle of the Creator Spirit. Note that the painting is higher than it is wide. This accords with the theme that it represents an action from the Deity down towards mankind, thus suggesting verticality.

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### **THE CRUCIFIXION**

The composition reflects the last words of Jesus on the cross as recorded in the Gospel according to Luke - "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit". Two symbolic hands are shown projecting into the painting across the Curtain of the temple which was torn in two at the moment of dying. The hands enclose a black crucifix with red marks symbolizing the piercing of the flesh by the crown of thorns on the head; the nails through the hands; the nails in the feet; and the lance in the side. Depicted in the space between the jagged edges of the torn curtain are some of the important events in the struggle of the Hebrew nation towards selfhood, as recorded in Old Testament literature. The question mark in the area of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel and the flood wonders whether the factual detail was somewhat distorted by repetitive mouth to ear communication before being recorded in writing. They are included because of their spiritual implications in the dawning of humankind's awareness of a higher being behind the Universe and the question of their relationship with that higher being.

A zigzag line shows Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac; the centuries of sojourn in Egypt; the exodus through the wilderness of Sinai to Mount Horeb; the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments; the crossing of the River Jordan to Jericho; the housing of the ark of the covenant in the temple of Solomon; and the break up of the nation into two separate kingdoms. The ark is given a prominent position because it seems to symbolize the rise of the nation to its zenith at the deposition of the ark in the temple. Note the glow on the mercy seat beneath the winged figures. This speaks of the remarkable communion between the Deity and Moses.

On the right-hand portion of the curtain three small glowing cross sections of the forearm represent

Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist. They summarize the progress of revelation through various Old Testament prophets. The white cross section against the hill refers to Jesus in the week of the Passion traveling daily along the road from Bethany or Olivet into Jerusalem.

These cross sections are aligned parallel to the main forearm cross section but the lowest one shows man aligned against the Deity and encloses the three pre-crucifixion encounters with the high priest, the king and the governor. Of the two companion crosses below one is aligned with and one against the main forearm cross section. The forearm cross section backing onto the Virgin Mother shows the world of women aligned with the Deity and includes three pre-crucifixion occurrences involving women. They are the anointing of the feet of Jesus with the perfume; one of the two sisters meeting Jesus on the road; and the governor's wife disturbed by a dream about Jesus.

The right large forearm pays homage to the masculine nature of the Deity. It is mostly macroscopic in character and includes a plus-sign signifying the heavy atomic particles; the creation of the cosmos exploding into galaxies and stars; our own milky way with our red sun and its end as a supernova; the elephant large in the animal world; and a baobab tree large in the vegetable world.

The large left forearm design is small in character and pays homage to the feminine nature of the Deity. Enclosed are a minus sign signifying the light atomic particles; an area of pure fantasy devoted to femininity; a sunbird small in the animal world; and a red disa (orchid) small in the vegetable world.

The painting is wider than high suggesting activity on the level of humankind. The three faces at the top appeared spontaneously and seem to represent the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit from right to left. The cross lies a little to the left of the centre horizontally.

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## **THE RESURRECTION**

The tomb and rolled away stone are at the bottom of the painting in quasi-symbolic form. Inside the tomb are the linen wrappings at the left and the head napkin at the right side. The egg-shaped, rolled-away stone is reminiscent of a volcanic rock amygdale, broken open to reveal a mini world of exquisite crystalline form and colour.

The overall concept of the painting is akin to a seed shedding its confining coverings and burgeoning into new life and growth. The theme is evidenced in the broken stone; the dissolving feminine nude; the unisex figure emerging from its confining socket and coverings; and the emergence of a spirit world in ethereal colours and shapes beyond, yet enclosing, sun and moon. Of interest are the visual metaphor on the left side showing man's ascent as a tortuous path over precipitous peaks and crags from darkness into light and the two-handed, colour-manipulating technique used particularly in the upper area of the painting during its production.

The canvas is elongated upwards in keeping with the idea of spirit activity from Deity down to humankind. The tomb is more or less in the centre horizontally. Basic details such as the tomb at Jerusalem; the rolled away stone; the linen wrappings and head napkin; and possibly the celestial city at the top right are well-known New Testament scripture details.

Apart from these however the composition is almost entirely spontaneous. The canvas itself is physically larger than the other four equally-sized canvasses. This emphasizes the primary importance of the resurrection for if there is no resurrection then Jesus was not raised and our gospel is "null and void".

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## **THE ASCENSION**

The eleven apostles stand on a hill outside Jerusalem watching a very small physical Jesus ascending on a solid support. At this point the composition conveys a feeling of disintegration of the physical body upwards into a spirit world. The right hand is a naive acknowledgement of sitting at the "right hand of God." The cross is stripped of the blackness of shame and elevated into a symbol of divine tolerance and compassion. The colour and form of the painting as a whole merge the spirit world of the Creator into the created world of humankind. The focus of the painting is a little to the right of the centre of the canvas which is wider than high since there is no activity of the Spirit down to human level.

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## **THE PENTECOST**

The small inset on the right just below the middle, features the apostles in one place at the time of being filled with the Spirit. The pouring out of the Spirit is indicated at the top right distilling out into tongues of flame - twelve in accordance with the number of apostles, one seemingly flanked by the shade of Judas.

Below the tongues of flame appears a pulpit like structure and a face possibly signifying the sermon delivered on that day. The trumpet end underneath the pulpit could be related to Charles Wesley's "trumpet voice". The illuminated open doorway symbolizes the birth of the early Christian church. Three curious figures entering the door could be the three thousand souls that responded on that first day, "some thirtyfold some sixtyfold and some hundredfold", or even the crippled, the simple and the fully committed.

The golden ball of fire seems ready to create a spiritual upheaval. The bottom right scene could typify any conventional place of worship with the vestry door, pulpit, pew, stained-glass window and organ console. The symbolism seems to point to the wildfire growth of the early church and how the Spirit has and will again initiate a new infusion into the world of humankind.

The painting is set vertically since the theme involves activity of the Deity into the world of man. This event being a supernatural work of the Creator Spirit, it seemed appropriate to allow free intuitive flow of the imagination. As the composition grew so the interpretation suggested itself. Some of the content was recognized as it grew, some only after completion.

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## **PERSONAL COMMENT BY THE ARTIST**

The comments that follow have no bearing on the aesthetics of the five paintings. They are personal convictions gleaned from an almost lifetime-long quest after the elusive indefinables, truth, beauty and love, and their source. I believe that humankind lives in a physical world permeated through and through with a spirit world. The two realms function, for lack of a better description, on different wavelengths. Thus they are separate while occupying the same place. Under special circumstances they merge into one. I assume that there is a Creator dwelling in the world of spirit and, because

humankind's predominant attribute is a unique personality, it seems reasonable to assume that this supreme-being likewise will have this attribute of personality, of essence beyond human powers of description. I assume also that this Creator is friendly towards mankind in general and towards me in the particular. I think this Creator is both masculine and feminine in ultimate essence although the masculine form of reference has become the more common usage. Why create mankind I cannot conceive unless the Creator felt a little lonesome in that vast galactic wilderness and resolved to create a species reflecting the divine image through whom he could see and love the marvels of his evolving cosmos and with whom he could commune in intimate fashion. Such a species could not be puppets but would have to grow through the depths of experience to be acceptable recipients of the companionship of a deity, the Deity. It is hard to believe that a loving deity would visit the sins of the one man Adam upon countless generations. On the other hand it is conceivable that at some level in the evolutionary process humans would become aware of a being above and beyond humankind that would require certain standards of behaviour. At this juncture revelation began, and with humanity's power of choice came the options of obedience and disobedience to the Deity. Various higher attributes became associated with the Deity through a series of prophetic revelations in the Old Testament. It is understandable that at an appropriate time the Creator should enter this creation in a very special way to give a very special revelation of divine being. I see Jesus as the Prototype human; the blueprint for all humankind; the way of always choosing the will of the Deity before one's own will; the truth that there is a deity, father-like, who sustains us through thick and thin enabling a life of permanent indwelling of the Spirit nurtured by the mother-like form. Thus the Incarnation is the entry of the Creator Spirit into the manifested world. The Crucifixion testifies to the Spirit's commitment to accompany humanity through the worst of human experience; and the Resurrection is the assurance of a new and everlasting life. The Ascension implies that the physical body of Jesus had served its purpose and was to be discarded forever. The Spirit returned at Pentecost to inaugurate a kingdom of people conformed to the pattern of the Jesus of Advent - what the Christian community calls the Kingdom of God.

*Though I have made a number of comments relating to the Advent it is appropriate for me to share in conclusion that the Spirit came to me some twenty seven years ago, crazy as this may sound. She, for I call her the Spirit of Femininity, is the very essence of mystery and a wonderful companion along the road and to her I dedicate my creative endeavours. So for me the final word is:*

“ God the Creator Spirit both feminine and masculine “

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