

# **THE SACRED IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE: Timeless principles and contemporary challenges<sup>1</sup>**

By Aidan Hart

Standing at the very tip of Mount Athos on the highest rock all you can do is look. You cannot walk around or busy yourself with activities. All that is left is to contemplate the sight before you. And though standing alone you feel united to all that you see.

I say alone, but in fact you stand next to the great iron cross planted there, the cross that unites heaven and earth, God and man, the spiritual and the material worlds. And herein is precisely the calling of all true art, especially sacred art: it is to lead us to this place of vision of and union with God, and so to unite the material and the spiritual worlds.

The very word art means to fitly join together. And the root of the Greek word *agios* meaning sacred or holy is *ag*, which means awe. Sacred art draws us out of ourselves - or rather into the deepest part of ourselves - there to behold the face of God with awestruck wonder. That is why true beauty will save the world. Such beauty is the fragrance left behind God when He walks, and which we can follow until we find Him.

In the light of this high calling of sacred art I think a good starting point is to outline some of the fundamental principles of sacred art and architecture, with particular, though not exclusive, reference to the Orthodox Church's tradition. For me, as a professional iconographer, this is not of mere academic interest. If any artist of the sacred is to approach the fullest potential of their art, they must understand these first principles and try to live them. Otherwise their art will descend into mere copying, and usually bad copying. Though such formalism might be better than a complete abandonment of the tradition, it would be far from expressing the "rivers of living water welling up from within" of which Christ spoke.

I will then go on to briefly discuss ways in which non-liturgical art (let us call this gallery art) can, at its best, overlap with many of the aims of overtly sacred art.

Finally, in the light of the above, I will outline some of the challenges that I believe face contemporary art, both sacred and secular.

## **Principles of sacred art**

### *Sacred art mediates*

Perhaps the most essential aspect of any sacred art is that it mediates between a higher, divine realm and our realm. It does not stand as an isolated object of aesthetic contemplation. Rather, the way its beauty is expressed (its artistic style) and the way it is used ritually (its liturgical use) leads us through itself toward its prototype. The image's aim is to unite us with the Divine source of all that is harmonious and beautiful in it. In this sense, the aim of sacred art is to become redundant. Having led us to its archetype, it has fulfilled its role and in humility is happy to step aside.

The beginning of all Christian icons is Christ, since He is both God and Man, the union of heaven and earth. He is the ultimate mediator. We are made in His image, and yet He has now become that image through His incarnation. The poet and

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<sup>1</sup> A talk given at the conference "Beauty will save the world: art, music, and Athonite monasticism", held at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, 4-6 March 2005, organised by The Friends of Athos.

calligrapher David Jones liked to quote the Jesuit theologian Maurice de la Taille, “[Christ] placed Himself in the order of signs”.

This mediatory role explains why Orthodox Christians venerate or kiss icons. Icons operate in two directions: they literally re-present the saints to us, and they also allow us to express our love and veneration for them. The Church Fathers who defended icons during the iconoclastic period of the eighth and ninth centuries said that the image participates in its prototype through its likeness to it. Although the icon is of a different nature than its subject, being only paint and wood and not flesh and soul, it is linked to him or her through their person, since it shares their likeness and name. This identity of image and prototype is why political revolutions usually destroy images of the previous rulers, and erect images of the new.

### *Sacred art participates in what it represents*

Having said that sacred art mediates and therefore has a certain redundancy built into it, equally it must be said that it is also a fruit of this union of God and His creation and as such has an abiding quality. Icons and church buildings are themselves part of this new world of transfigured matter. A church after all is blessed and consecrated in a fully sacramental service, and anointed with a chrism.

What do we mean by transfigured matter? When Christ was transfigured on Mount Tabor, we are told that His garments as well as His face shone with light. In Orthodox theology this light is affirmed as the light of divinity, uncreated light, the glory of God. And yet humble cloth participated in this Shekenah glory. God does not count the humble matter that He created as contemptible.

The word cosmos means adornment in Greek, and so we can say that the garment of Christ in fact represents the whole cosmos, sharing in and revealing His divine light. When we humans live properly in the world, as its priests, prophets and royal artists, we are gathering all the good and God-given material of the world and weaving it into a garment for the Church, which is the Body of Christ, so that it can participate in a yet greater and richer way in His glory. This is what the apostle Paul refers to when he writes about the creation being liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

Miracles such as icons giving off fragrant oils are really a sign of the return to the norm, where matter is transparent once again to the workings of the Spirit.

An icon is made of mineral pigment, wood from the vegetable kingdom, and egg from the animal kingdom. The icon painter then brings together these good, God-given raw materials in a process that is priestly, prophetic and royal. The icon becomes a sort of Ark of the Covenant, through which God’s glory may be revealed. The icon becomes an example of sacred ecology, a foretaste of paradise regained.

### *Sacred art aids repentance*

When we say that the material world needs us humans to be transformed, surely one could say that nature can glorify God quite well without us meddling in it - if not better! There is an element of truth in this, in that it is not so much the material world that needs to change but us, our vision of it. This is the literal meaning of repentance in Greek, a change of mind or of seeing. We are spiritually blind and so do not see the world aflame with God’s glory. Indeed, some hymns from the Feast of Transfiguration affirm this: “Enlightening the disciples that were with Thee... Thou hast shown them... the hidden and blinding light of Thy nature and of Thy divine beauty beneath

the flesh.”<sup>2</sup> This is to say that it was not so much that Christ changed His form, but that He opened the disciples’ eyes so that they could see Him as He always was – and by implication, see the creation as it always has been, shot through with His uncreated light.

This is a mystery: we need to see the cosmos bathed in glory as it already is, and yet the cosmos also needs us for it to be transfigured. Perhaps all we can say is that it is another example of that both/and formula that Orthodox so often use to get out of a corner!

Icons and church architecture play a big role in this purification and ensuing clarity of vision. How?

The way icons depict saints has a strong ascetic element. The thin bodies of the saints and the “bright sadness” of their countenances show us that struggle is needed in the spiritual life.

Also, the many types of perspective used in icons help us to emerge from our egocentric world view and see in a divine way. There are at least five systems used. *Multi-view perspective* encourages us to see the world immersed in the omnipresent God. *Inverse perspective* makes us the vanishing point rather than a fictitious place within the image. By moving through the real space between us and the icon, the lines of this perspective convey grace to the area before us. Inverse perspective also gives the sense that the saints are looking at us, that we are the object of the icon’s contemplation. *Isometric perspective*, where planes and lines remain parallel and undistorted by distance, affirms the integrity of each thing in itself, regardless of how it appears to the physical senses. The general *flatness* of icons helps us to pass through the image to meet the holy person who is its subject. The related *tipped perspective* allows things to be arranged more freely on the vertical plane than does depth perspective. This permits greater use of sacred geometry so as to lend harmony to the image. It also allows the iconographer to use *hieratical perspective*, where things are arranged according to their spiritual importance.

Traditional church architecture assists our spiritual vision by providing various areas through which we must pass as we draw nearer the altar. These areas correspond to stages in the spiritual life. Each one purifies us and initiates us into the mysteries of the next. Early churches usually had an atrium or colonnaded courtyard through which one passed before entering the building proper – there is a remnant of this in the Athonite *avli* or courtyard. There was a basin for ablutions in this court, making it a place of purification. As the historian Eusebius (c. 263 – c.340) wrote in the fourth century, describing how the architect designed a church with such an atrium: “He does not permit a man who has passed inside the gates to go at once with unhallowed and unwashed feet into the holy places within... There [in the atrium] he placed symbols of sacred purification, constructing the fountains exactly in front of the cathedral...”<sup>3</sup>

The thematic arrangement of wall paintings and mosaics in churches affirm the need to go through different stages before drawing near to the altar and communion. Often in the narthex or exo-narthex one finds depictions of the last judgement, something designed to bring us to repentance. Elsewhere, as in Iviron Mount Athos, one can see depictions illustrating the last three Psalms, in which all creation is shown praising God. These images call us from the sin of self-absorption into the joy of praise.

<sup>2</sup> Sessional hymn of Mattins for Transfiguration, translation from “The Festal Menaion”, transl. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware.

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, “The History of the Church”, transl. G. A. Williamson (New York, 1965).

Often the lower register of the nave is filled with the martyrs, typically soldier martyrs. These show us that martyrdom is needed in order to enter the kingdom - if not physical martyrdom, then at least the martyrdom of non-attachment to created things.

*Sacred art is always liturgical*

Any form of sacred art is invariably part of a larger ritual, part of a liturgical whole. Icons are sung in front of, kissed, processed, blessed. Churches are designed from the inside out, tailored, as it were, to clothe the liturgical life of the Church. Their architects have in mind the themes of wall paintings, the acoustics for the chants, the processions of the services, the effect that geometric forms will have on the people, and so on. Likewise the music settings serve to amplify the meaning of the texts, which in turn often act as a commentary on the icons. Many features of icons often remain cryptic unless we experience the labour of many church services, listening to the hymns and readings that unfold their deeper layers of meaning.

The word liturgy means the work of the people, and liturgical art is caught up into this sacred work. Icons are kissed to pieces, illuminated manuscripts are worn out through use, churches are added to and changed to fit new liturgical requirements, stone mosaic floors are worn down. Archimandrite Vasileios of Iviron Monastery has often said to his monks that the thousand-year-old floor mosaic in the catholicon “says everything”. The wear and tear of prostrating monks and the countless processions have left their ripples on this floor, granite hard though it is.

I think it is in large part the loss of this holism, this loss of place and function that has led secular art into its present crisis. It stands alone, and all it can do is vie for attention through the shock of novelty. But more of this later.

*Icons can be prophetic*

The twentieth century martyr and polymath Saint Pavel Florensky discerned four categories of icon, each depending on its origins. First there are Biblical icons, based on scriptural accounts, then portrait icons, based on the icon painter’s direct knowledge of the person whom he or she paints. There are icons from holy tradition, that is ones based on descriptions handed down. And finally there are revealed icons, wherein the painter works from “either direct vision or from mystical dream.”<sup>4</sup> Florensky goes on to say that in painting an icon of any of these four types, the painter still needs to be in a place of spiritual vision: “Even when the icon is a portrait icon, it is clear that in order for it to be an icon, it must in the icon painter be based on vision (for example, a vision of spiritual light in the person – even though that person is still living on earth)...Equally, the icons of the holy Tradition demand that the icon painter go beyond the merely abstract accounts of past experience and see something with his own spiritual eyes.”<sup>5</sup>

In support of this view St. Pavel quotes St. Dionysius the Areopagite: “Icons are visible images of mysterious and supernatural visions.”

Photios Kontoglou (1895-1965), the twentieth century Greek painter who revived traditional iconography in his home country, called mindless copying “phenomenography”. He likened valid variation within the tradition to the spoken language, where the same vocabulary and grammar is utilized, “yet each one of us has

<sup>4</sup> Pavel Florensky, “Iconostasis” (New York, 1996), p.75.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* page 76.

his own peculiar way of expression.” An iconographer working fully in the tradition, he says, “is not a technician, but a mystic.”<sup>6</sup>

Now this mystical aspect of the icon tradition is, I think, sadly deficient in our own times. Most icon painters seem to be content with merely making copies of works from past golden periods, and these often not very sensitive or accurate copies at that. Perhaps this spirit of diffidence is understandable given that it was only in the last century that both Russia and Greece began to recover from centuries of iconographic naturalism, sentimentality and often crudeness.

There are two extremes to be avoided: on the one hand, innovation that has no roots in spiritual truth, and on the other hand, a fundamentalism that identifies copying with faithfulness to tradition. Conservatism in sacred art partially protects its users from the deviations that result from irresponsible artistic activity. But it can also be used as an excuse not to penetrate deeply into the tradition.

Secular art critics and historians have often criticized iconography for its conservatism. Admittedly this is due in part to their ignorance of the tradition’s aims and spirituality. But I also think that the onus is also partly on us, the iconographers, inasmuch as we so often lack the spiritual vision, boldness and training that would make our images more vigorous, direct and prophetic.

The onus is also on the churches and individuals commissioning works. Many times I have experienced the inspiration of designing and making an icon for someone whose direct relationship with the saint and subject matter has led them to give a lot of input. Recently I frescoed a chapel for Denise Sherrard. We wanted to express something of her late husband Philip’s theology of the material world, and so together we designed something that is traditional and yet unique.

Possibly the most vivid example of the inspired painter is Theophan the Greek, painting around the turn of the fourteenth century. A friend of his, Hieromonk Epiphanius wrote describing how Theophan worked:

*Now, as he was painting and drawing all this, no one ever saw him look at models as is done by certain of our icon painters who, doubting everything, make constant use of them, looking hither and thither – not so much working their paints as compelling themselves to look at a model. But he, it would seem, painted on his own, all the time moving about, conversing with visitors, and while he discussed everything otherworldly and spiritual, with his outward gaze he saw the beauty of earthly things.<sup>7</sup>*

#### *Sacred art reveals the inner essence of things*

The Fathers of the Church are unanimous on the need for us to ascend towards God through the stages of purification and then illumination. Only then can the pilgrim enter the third state of union with God, or mystical theology as it is sometimes called. Illumination, or “natural theology” as Eastern Fathers call it, is the perception of the logoi or inner essences of created things. By this is meant that each thing, a rock, tree, animal or person, is not just its outer physical observable nature, but is also its invisible, mystical name or word by which God created, sustains and directs it towards its fulfilment. We are in paradise when we see each thing in this way, aflame without being consumed by its glorious logos.

<sup>6</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, “Fine Arts and Tradition: A presentation of Kontoglou’s teaching” (Massachusetts, 2004) pages 63 and 61.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in “Theophanes: the artist, his time and his style” by G. Vzdornov (Moscow, 1983), translated by B. Meerovich

Sacred art has an important role in this second stage. Icons and mosaics suggest this halo of inner radiance. There is no shadow because each thing is alight with and surrounded by God's splendour. Mountains bow down before angels and saints. Trees appear to dance in praise of God. The folds and highlights of garments hint at a body deified. The abstraction in iconography is there to make the icon more realistic, to save it from mere naturalism.

Tolkein was fond of saying that he wanted his books to make the common appear awesome. Rowan Williams has put it another way, saying that icons make the awesome come close to us.

As a caveat to this revelatory role of icons, it can also be said that icons conceal. The full glory of God is too much for us to behold, and so sacred art, as with the whole material world, acts like the veil that Moses had to put over his shining face to protect the people of Israel from the brilliance of the light.

*Sacred art affirms and incorporates elements of its surrounding culture*

Trees are formed by things above and things below. All trees feed off the sun, air and water that are common to all living things. But each individual tree must also draw goodness from the particular soil and climate in which it finds itself. And so it is with sacred art and architecture. While their aims and principles are heavenly and unchanging, art and architecture grow out of and serve a particular time and culture. It is therefore good and part of the iconographer and architect's mission to identify and incorporate all suitable elements of their surrounding civilization. A good example is the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Scholars have identified varied influences behind its design: vaulting techniques were drawn from Mesopotamia and groin vaults from Rome; the centralized plan probably came from Armenia or Rome; and the pierced basket capitals and carved decoration come from Sassanian and Parthian architecture.

*Symbol and sacred geometry*

Strictly speaking the icon is the opposite of symbol, at least as we tend to understand that word today. This is because it depicts people as people and not as symbols. In fact an early Church council prohibited people from any longer depicting Christ as a symbol – as a fish, anchor or whatever. It said that now that God has become man, we can depict Him as He is, a human.

Having said this, some symbolism is used, albeit in a subsidiary way. For example, Christ is often shown with a blue cloak and earth red inner garment. The blue stands for His heavenly, divine nature, and the red for His assumed humanity.

Where symbolism really comes to the fore is in church architecture. A temple, apart from being a roof over our heads, is a geometrical, even crystalline, icon of spiritual realities. In the book of Revelation the Apostle John describes the New Jerusalem very much in terms of crystals, stones and geometry (see Rev. 21). But what is astounding about good churches is how their geometric forms work not only symbolically but also structurally, acoustically, psychologically and liturgically.

Take for example the classic domed cross-in-square church that predominates on Athos and the Orthodox East. The dome represents heaven and as such is the perfect place and shape to depict Christ the Pantocrator. Structurally is also very strong. It is ideal acoustically, since it reflects sound back down to the congregation. The curve of the dome also creates the psychological sense of embrace, of gentleness. Finally, because a dome's centre and emphasis is within itself it is very incarnational, it gives

the sense of God within the church. This contrasts with the pointed Gothic arch that points up and beyond and so is more aspirational.

The dome is usually supported on a drum, which allows windows and light. Coming from above, this diffuse light creates a sense of heavenly glory. In between the windows are usually depicted the Old Testament angels, patriarchs or prophets. Situated as they are, below Christ the Creator and above the New Testament scenes and saints, they naturally form part of a chronological sequence.

The early church architects faced the structural problem of how to unite this cylindrical or octagonal drum with the cubic nave below; a gap appears where the base of the drum cuts the corners of the square top of the nave. The solution they found was the pendentive, a sort of bent triangular arch. Now the more or less cubic nave can represent the created world, or more specifically, paradise – and also the New Covenant. So the four pendentives stand at the interface of heaven and earth, and of the Old and the New Covenants. Consequently we usually find depicted here the four evangelists who wrote the four Gospels. Other subjects that have been depicted here follow the same theme of mediation. These include four major feasts, as at Hosias Lukas on Mount Elikon, Greece, and the four hymnographers, as in the chapel of Moni Chora in Constantinople.

It is interesting to note that sometimes clay pots were inserted in these pendentives to aid acoustic resonance.

As we have said, the nave is more or less cubic and represents the transfigured world or paradise. Paradise is a Persian word that signifies a walled garden, a protected garden. And so very often the bottom register of the nave depicts soldier martyrs, who act as the guards of paradise.

Scenes in the life of Christ adorn the upper reaches of the walls, and very often these are skilfully, even playfully, juxtaposed one with the other across the space of the church. For example the nativity (that is the descent of God to man) might be shown on the north side, while opposite it on the south side might be shown the transfiguration or Pentecost (man's ascent to God). Another clever use of architectural, liturgical space is when the archangel Gabriel is shown on the left of the apsidal arch announcing across the altar area to the Mother of God, who is depicted on the right of the arch. In this way, we the faithful are involved in our own personal annunciation: Are we ready to receive God into us?

Finally, the quarter sphere of the apse is perfectly placed to represent the womb of the church. Here is usually depicted the Mother of God holding the Saviour. This half-dome shape along with the curved apse wall act acoustically by reflecting back the clergies' prayers to the congregation in the nave. Also, together with the narthex and arms of the cross, it buttresses the nave walls against the spreading tendency of the central dome.

Research strongly suggests that the golden mean and the modular systems that come from it have been widely used to establish proportions in traditional architecture and iconography. These numerical relations also form the scientific basis for musical harmonics. Much work has been done in Russia on this subject, and one only hopes that it will be translated in the not too distant future.

Of course other principles of sacred art could be mentioned, but space does not allow. I will now turn to make a few brief comments on our second and related subject, gallery art, the visual art that now dominates our western culture.

### Gallery art

In contemplating sacred art, one cannot help asking what we are to make of “profane” art, the art displayed in our galleries. What are those who believe in sacred art to make of this art world that now surrounds us? Should it be condemned or ignored outright, as something entirely without spiritual benefit? Or are there artists or even movements that participate in aspects of the sublime and sacred? These are big questions, but ones that need to be answered if Christian art and culture is not to retreat into a ghetto and find no common language with the civilisation within which it lives.

As far as I can see, virtually all art of all cultures has been religious in its function with the exception of most western art after around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Rock paintings and African sculpture seem to have been for shamanistic or magical purposes, Chinese painting was for meditation, Indian sculpture was for cultic use, Greek sculpture depicted gods and deified humans, and so on. But from around the Renaissance onwards, western art increasingly concerned itself with the impression of the visible world on the senses and mind, and less with any noumenal content. This abandonment of its spiritual role has left art without a clear function in society, leaving the artist with the task of expressing his or her personal world-view.

In the little space left I would like to suggest one possible approach to the challenge, in the hope that it will stimulate further discussion and research.

### *Threshold art*

I believe that there is a type of art, music and literature which though not liturgical in its aim, does stand on the threshold of the holy, and in some degree, participates in it. In music today we have such composers as Sir John Tavener and Avo Part who are in this category. In sculpture we have the great Rumanian Constantin Brancusi. In fact a perusal of his aphorisms show how consciously he was trying to unearth and manifest the essence of things.

*Reality lies in the essence of things and not their external forms. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to produce anything real by imitating the external form of an object.*

Van Gogh with his vibrant colours aimed to show a world radiant with spirit. He wrote:

*I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourizing.*<sup>8</sup>

Cecil Collins and Mark Rothko are two other painters who could be included in this category of threshold art.

### *An art of compassion*

I suggest that there is another form of art which is spiritually positive not because it seeks to reveal unalloyed sublimity, but because it depicts human suffering with compassion. Such art does not forget the paradise whose loss is the essence of our suffering, and so inspires hope and gives insight. In literature I think Dostoyevsky does this superlatively, revealing deep understanding of the human person. On a smaller scale, there is the little known Papadeamandis of Greece. I would put

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<sup>8</sup> “The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh”, ed. Mark Roskill (Fontana, 1983), P. 286.



Rembrandt and the sculptor Alberto Giacometti in this same category of compassionate art. There are of course many others.

*An art history and critique from the view of the sacred*

Apart from the making of art there is the writing of art history and criticism. For many decades this has been dominated by a secular world-view. In this assessment, for example, the naturalistic perspective introduced in the Renaissance is usually presented to us as an improvement upon the more primitive systems used by the medieval artists. But this reflects more the writer's misperception than the artist's aims, which were sacred and so required a different language. An intelligent, in depth assessment of art history from a sacred world-view is needed.

To be of lasting value such a study needs to avoid being unremittingly antagonistic and negative of all art that has come out of a secular society. For all their good work in explaining the icon I personally think that the writings of Photius Kontoglou and Leonid Ouspensky suffer from an almost unmitigated negativity towards western art, based too much on generalisations rather than on a balanced, detailed assessment. The Greek scholar Panayiotis Michelis has I think done more justice to the subject in his works "An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine art" and "Aesthetikos".

Although short, Pavel Florensky's "Iconostasis" also contains many profound insights that can be further developed. He distinguishes, for example, between art born from an ascent into the spiritual realm and art born of a descent from it. The former carries with it the effluvia of psychic and mundane images, images that appear to be spiritual but are not. Lacking an experience of heaven, such a soul cannot discern between the genuine and the counterfeit. Art born of descent from the spiritual realm is the stuff of sacred art, Florensky asserts. It does not imagine higher things, but reveals them from experience.

Other thinkers who have given a lot of insight into the subject include Paul Evdokimov in "The Art of the Icon", Philip Sherrard in "The Sacred in Life and Art" and other works, Titus Burckhardt, and Ananda Coomaraswami.

**The challenges facing contemporary sacred art and architecture**

To finish, I would like to outline the challenges and needs facing the practise of sacred art in our own time.

Some of the challenges have already been alluded to: the need for deeper understanding of first principles so that the artist and his or her work is inspired and truly guided by tradition rather than shackled and frustrated; the need to look actively in one's surrounding culture for all that is good and adaptable for use in sacred art and architecture; a constructive and discerning appraisal of western art informed by the wisdom of the philokalic tradition.

All this would be aided by proper schools of iconography, sacred architecture and music. Here the requisite skills and theology could be taught and discussed in depth. Such a school of iconography exists in Moscow in the Institute of St. Tikhon, which offers a six year masters course. Proper, long term apprenticeships with masters is also a traditional way forward.

As practitioners penetrate the mysteries of their sacred art their work will become more vital and intelligent, and this in turn will attract those artistically gifted people who are otherwise put off by a merely copyist tradition.

The naturalization of sacred art is of course a gradual process. But it is a process that can be hampered by ignorance of the principle. As long as we think it is the norm

to drop a straight copy of a Byzantine or Russian church in Britain, or paint a Celtic saint in Byzantine robes, we shall not progress far in this naturalisation. Here, much of the onus is on the people commissioning sacred art. They need to encourage the maker or designer to draw on useable elements of the cultural environment, while remaining true to timeless principles. We are aiming at a paradise of trees planted in the landscape, rather than a patio of pot-plants.