RA Service for Artists

Sheona Beaumont reports on an unusual liturgical experience

Traditionally, Varnishing Day at the RA's annual Summer Exhibition was the place for a final seal of gloss on the paintings, a finishing off or occasional 'touch-up'. Today it has come to mark a moment of public arrival for both artwork and artist, and where a seal of exchange takes place: the artwork becomes the noun and the artist the verb, as displays dictate the mingling, the looking, the talking.

Yet a relatively unknown dimension of this well-known event is the long-standing occasion of a Service for Artists, which precedes the opening. Since 1956, this service has been held at St James's Piccadilly, the RA's parish church, whose rector has also held the position of Chaplain to the RA for most of this time. The Service was originally instigated in 1926 under the auspices of the then Chaplain, the Very Revd William Foxley Norris (Dean of Westminster), and speakers at the service have included professors, MPs, senior church figures, and representatives of arts organisations.

As a rather mute statement of institutional affiliation with the Church of England (in contrast to that conferred by the title 'Royal' for the Academy), the Service today seems at odds with the spectacle of art as fashion and business, epitomized by the high-profile Summer Exhibition Preview Party held two days later. Although there has been more recent noise over the Service for Artists in the form of a procession from gallery to church, which started in 1990 accompanied by clergy and steel band, one wonders if its fate will be the similar media eclipse witnessed over a detail of the historical 1969 moon-landing – Buzz Aldrin's celebration of communion before exiting the lunar module was both denied broadcast at the time and has since faded from the accepted sequence of events. It is hoped on two counts that this will not happen to the Service for Artists: both for the sake of what it upholds as a vision for art and artists, and for the sake of its model of collective humility.

In the address given at this year's Service, the Revd Dr Sam Wells (St Martin in the Fields) described the role of artists in the Calvinist terms of priest, prophet and king and the character of art as holy and worshipful. There was no sidelining of the creative sphere, no diminishing of its field as a means to a didactic end; there was only its elevation to a supernatural ministry in which revelation of the divine finds expression in "the triangle of forms, media and ideas." Artists were encouraged to step out from the label of isolated and tortured Bohemianism, and into a holistic and embedded way of life where imagination (born of intimate knowledge of their craft) forms the point of connection with others.

On a more subtle level, the Service demonstrated the place for a different posture within the midst of an artist community: prayers, hymns, a Bible reading, and choral pieces permit a kind of corporate yielding to another dimension. If the dualism of artwork as noun and artist as verb remained the only words spoken on Varnishing Day, the syntax of the creative language would remain stilted. Instead the Service points to a different perspective, something like the distant field where David practiced his shepherding, while his brothers paraded in the gallery spotlight for their moment of fame. As a modern commissioning service, it binds artists together at the level of servanthood, which echoes 18th century orthodox dedications of icon painters. It is this sanction which embodies the spirit of the Service.

(The reference is to the introduction of *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna* (trans. Paul Hetherington, The Sagittarius Press, London, 1974; p.4), where mention is made of a priestly blessing and dedication. Sheona Beaumont would be interested to know of other commissioning services for artists and/or church addresses on the subject – please contact her at sho@shospace.co.uk if you are able to help)