

# Mediterranean Art



*By Frank Haggett*

THE most lasting impressions one has of countries visited are of the art of the peoples, past and present. Thoughts of Egypt conjure up pictures of pyramids and strange squat gods; Greece brings to mind the Parthenon; Rome suggests statues and fountains, and so on. Art is a glass through which we see the ideas and ideals of a particular locality or period. Especially is this true with regard to religious beliefs.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the "Ra" or spirit could re-inhabit the body at will, and so it was very important for the bodies of the dead to be preserved or, failing that, replicas in stone substituted so that the spirit could enjoy again, in the Kingdom of the Departed, the pleasures it once tasted on earth. This belief determined the nature of their sculpture. Statues were made of the hardest materials—basalt, diorobite, quartz and granite and they were made solidly, seated on massive thrones or standing against solid columns—no dramatic postures which might mean the loss of arm or leg or head; these figures were made to endure for eternity. The pathetic little figurines to harbour the tiny souls of the common folk sharing the ponderous protection of the tomb of the Pharaoh whom they once served, convey to us more forcibly than words, the notion of benevolent despotism. The calm dignity and the smiling composure of these Pharaonic figures as well as the enormous difference from those of the peasants give some measure of the regard of the latter for their gods and their descendants, the Pharaohs. The ponderous weight of temple architecture, rows of gigantic

columns, much more than sufficient to support the heaviest roof, bespeaks power superhuman.

The tutelary gods of Babylon and Assyria reveal an ideology of symbolism. These human-headed monsters with bodies of bulls and lions with eagles wings give the impression of human cunning combined with brute strength and the ubiquity of the kings of the air. The Hebrews contributed nothing to plastic art on account of religious prohibitions, but being Semitic, they too interpreted their religion in symbols, as exemplified by the specifications for the building of the Tabernacle and the Book of Revelations.

And what of Islam: Mahommed preached incessantly against idolatrous practices and the Koran, while not exactly prohibiting the representation of living creatures, explained that the soul of the maker of such things would be responsible in the hereafter to the souls of the things he had imitated.

The difficulty was surmounted by conventionalising plant and animal forms so that no individual souls could exact retribution, and an enormous variety of geometrical ornament sprang into existence. It is well known that Western Europe learnt mathematics from the Saracens. This application of geometry was then an expression of their racial inheritance. Certainly in Persia and in India the veneration of Mahommedan culture still permitted the traditional art to break through and produce beautiful illuminated manuscripts and miniatures.