

Hans Feibusch

15 August 1898 – 18 July 1998

Hans Feibusch was a German Jew responsible for more murals in churches in England than any other 20th century artist. He displayed a subtle, profound understanding of the decorative role art can continue to play, and of the Christian message.

He was born into a Jewish family in Frankfurt-on-Main, Germany. During the First World War, he was conscripted into the German Army where he served on the Russian Front. It was here that he discovered his talent for drawing. On his return to Germany in 1918, he went to Berlin and studied under the artist Carl Hofer then to further study in Italy. His early work consisted of mythological paintings and still-life. In 1930, he received the German Grand State Prize for painting.

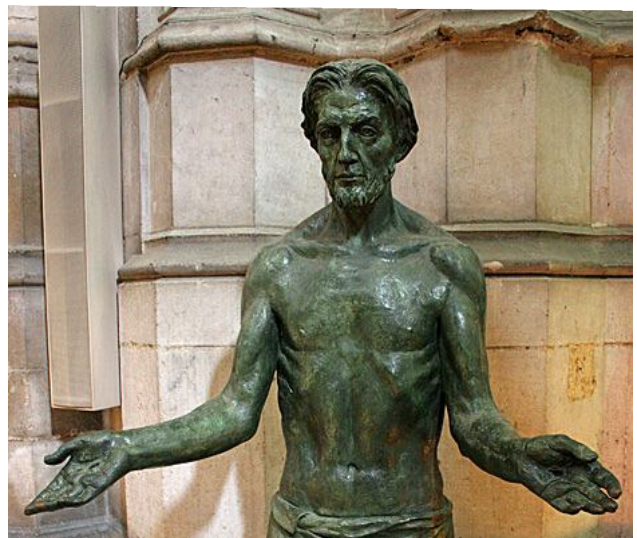
The rise of the Nazi party prompted Feibusch to move to England in 1933, to join his fiancée, Sidonie Gestetner whom he married in 1935. They settled in London, where initially he designed posters for Shell and the London Underground. His work was banned in Germany and featured in Goebbels' notorious Degenerate Art Exhibition in 1937.

A crucial point in his career came in 1938, when he was asked to do a mural for a Methodist chapel in Collier's Wood, in London. It was this work which brought Feibusch to the attention of George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, who commissioned Feibusch to execute murals in various churches in the Chichester diocese.



The baptism of Christ, Chichester Cathedral, Hans Feibusch, 1951

He became celebrated as a leading mural painter in Britain and painted 40 murals in various churches between 1938 and 1974. His work was strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance tradition of wall painting that he saw during his time in Florence, Rome, Perugia, Pisa and Venice. He also painted murals of secular subjects, notably in the Town Hall at Dudley and the Civic Centre at Newport, Monmouthshire. He was a friend of the architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, best known for the village he created at Portmeirion, North Wales, where Feibusch completed several murals.



Christus, Ely Cathedral, Hans Feibusch 1981

Feibusch continued to work throughout his long life and painted murals into his seventies. Failing eyesight, caused by glaucoma, led him later to turn to sculpture and his figure of Christ, in Ely Cathedral is a fine example of this work.

Feibusch converted to Christianity in 1965, but towards the end of his life, haunted by the tragedy of the Jewish experience, he reverted to Judaism and is buried at Golders Green Jewish cemetery. After his death, just a few weeks short of his 100th birthday, the contents of his studio were given to the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester which displays a permanent show of his work.

St. Marks, Coventry



Feibusch was working here in St Marks in 1963, just one year after the consecration of the new Cathedral in Coventry. At the beginning of WWII a stained glass window had pride of place behind the altar but bomb damage destroyed the glass in the window leaving the wall standing. Lack of money and building materials post-war meant that the parish had to wait to make repairs but the money just wasn't around and the congregation 'made do' with a blank wall for many years. During this time Feibusch became well known nationally as a mural artist in church buildings and the Church Council decided to commission him to create this work. It was unveiled and dedicated at the patronal festival of St Mark in April 1963.

In 1972, just nine years later, the church was closed for worship and the mural was hidden away. When the building was adapted for use as an annex to the out-patients department the area around the mural was partitioned off and the Chancel arch filled in to create the space we see today.

The subject matter of 'Ascension' - sometimes referred to at the time of its dedication as 'Christ in Glory' - depicts Christ ascending up to heaven surrounded by saints and angels. You clearly see the wounds from the crucifixion in the hands and feet in the figure of the ascending Christ. It is a traditional scene, often used by Feibusch, but its treatment is entirely contemporary, mixing figures in modern dress with those in traditional, biblical attire. St Mark, with the Lion, and St Barnabas are painted in the bottom left corner. The contemporary figures in the bottom right hand corner are graphically painted.

"To see the way some of our best church and Cathedral builders decorate their work with nursery emblems, golden stars, chubby Christmas angels, lilies, lambs and shepherds, insipid sculpture and paintings of a silly, false naivety, one wonders in what world they live. The men, who come home from the war, and all the rest of us, have seen too much horror and evil. Only the most profound, tragic, moving, sublime vision can redeem us."

Hans Feibusch

The standing figure with his back to us is pleading to the risen Christ for help as the kneeling man is viciously attacked—a depiction of man's inhumanity to man.

There are echoes here of mediaeval Doom paintings—the figures being carried by the angels from the darkness of brutality into the light of love and forgiveness.

It is entirely appropriate that Feibusch, who had first hand experience of brutal persecution should include this imagery in his depiction of the Ascension.



Ascension, St Mark's, Swanswell, Coventry, Hans Feibusch 1963