

## Marie-Alain Couturier: A Name to be Remembered

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### ABSTRACT

This article addresses part of the life and work of Marie-Alain Couturier, French Dominican friar and Catholic priest who played a prominent role in the field of the Sacred Art of the 20th century. Forgotten or simply ignored by most of art historians (History is also made of silences and absences), Marie-Alain Couturier died at age 56, certainly a very young age for someone who had so much to give. The Author thanks Professor and Art Historian Gerd-Helge Vogel and the Visual Artist Rafael Frota for their generous cooperation.

**Keywords:** Marie-Alain Couturier, Sacred Art, Catholicism, France, History of Art.

*A thing that is really done from the heart will one day or another again touch the hearts of others.*

Marie-Alain Couturier

### INTRODUCTION

Facts are not the only and exclusive raw material of History; Herodotus' "daughter"<sup>1</sup> is also made of silences and absences. That is particularly the case of the French Dominican friar and Catholic priest Marie-Alain Couturier, born in 1897 and deceased in 1954. Born Pierre-Charles-Marie Couturier in Montbrison, Loire, he stood out mainly as a designer of stained glass windows, and also because of his welcoming attitude concerning Modernism in the sphere of Sacred Art. Renowned contemporary historians of art, such as Ernst Gombrich, Horst Waldemar Janson and Giulio Carlo Argan do not even mention him in their most widespread works. That is one of the reasons why, for the great majority of the public (and within this concept I include art fans, theoreticians and creators – i.e., artists – in

general) never heard or read about Marie-Alain Couturier; for them, he is an unknown person.



Figure 1. Marie-Alain Couturier in his forties  
(Drawing made by the Author)

### TRANSLATING PAIN INTO BEAUTY

In 1914, Pierre Couturier graduated, having majored in Literature, Latin, and Greek. World War I was already in progress, and he was not spared: called up in 1915, the young French soldier left for the front in 1916, where he was wounded and, on that account, evacuated. Convalescent, he was initiated in art by the painter Etienne Joseph Lambertson, and that allowed him to sublimate his pain, translating it into beauty. Recovered, "with art in mind as a

<sup>1</sup>Considered the father of History, the Greek Herodotus (c. 484 BC-c. 425 BC) had his "daughter" inseparably linked with one of the muses: Clio, "the muse of history, or, in a few mythological accounts, the muse of lyre playing. Clio, sometimes referred to as 'the Proclaimer', is also represented with an open parchment scroll, a book, or a set of tablets. The name is etymologically derived from the Greek root κλέω/κλείω [meaning 'to recount', 'to make famous', or 'to celebrate']" (Paul Harvey et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clio>).

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career”<sup>2</sup>, Pierre Couturier began to paint professionally. It was late 1917 and more was to come.

In 1919, Paul-Albert Bartholome –already recognized as painter and sculptor and a close friend of Edgar Degas– prompted Couturier to move to Paris (by that time capital of the Western art and culture in general), which he did. In that same year, we see him integrated into the *Sacred Art Workshops*, an institution founded by George Desvallieres and Maurice Denis, which offered training in all fields of Catholic Sacred Art, just as it happened in medieval times, when Western art and religious art were practically one and the same thing. There he was trained by Marguerite Hure.

Immersed in such a spiritual environment, it is little wonder that Pierre Couturier channeled his life into a religious vocation: “Pierre made his profession of Oblate Benedictine April 7, 1924. He decided however to enter the Dominicans in 1925, ‘suddenly’ according to the testimony he left us. He took the habit on September 22, 1925 at the novitiate of Amiens at the same time as fifteen other novices.



**Figure 2.** Rome, Father Couturier’s second homeland  
(Photo taken by the Author)

He made his simple profession a year later and by at Saulchoir Convent in Kain”<sup>3</sup>. Artistically speaking, this is a particularly fertile period for him, as his multiple drawings, watercolors and gouaches bear witness.

In 1930, he is already a priest and changes France for Italy, namely Rome, where he completes his last years of study and begins a correspondence with Pie Raymond Regamey –

<sup>2</sup>Marguerite Huré et alii. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain\\_Couturier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain_Couturier).

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Christophe Stuccilli et alii. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain\\_Couturier](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain_Couturier).

ex-Protestant converted to Catholicism, who would become not only a French Dominican priest like Couturier, but also a historian of art and a prolific writer on spiritual matters<sup>4</sup>–, who soon becomes “a constant in his consecrated life”<sup>5</sup>.

It was also in Rome that he attended Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange’s courses in Sacred Art, Mysticism, and Aesthetics. From 1932 to 1935, we find Couturier (already Marie-Alain) back in France, carrying out his ministry at Sainte-Anne in Haute-Savoie. Painting became part of his day to day: whether for himself, whether to serve religious demands of his fellow friars and priests. Notwithstanding, this time is not without some artistic failures.

1935: Paris again, where he, at the Convent of Saint-Honore, was in charge of everything concerning Catholic art. 1936: his intervention was crucial for the survival of the magazine *L’Art Sacree* (“The Sacred Art”, founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by some Catholic intellectuals and artists, such as J. K. Huysmans, Paul Claudel and Maurice Denis), whose leadership he came to take over together with Pie Raymond Regamey.

## CONCLUSION

A few years later, however, the magazine was closed down<sup>6</sup>, when France, defeated at the very beginning of the Second World War, was relegated to a mere province of the Third Reich. For Couturier, it is a time of new and continental change: his American period started. He was sent to New York to preach Lent at the French parish of Saint Vincent de Paul, from where he, invited by Etienne Gilson, went to Montreal in order to teach at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*. Paul-Emile Borduas, Alfred Pellan, Maurice Gagnon and Louise Gadbois are some of the Canadian artists with whom he develops friendship. Tireless, he became engaged in several artistic projects, not to mention the numerous important conferences and exhibitions he himself organized.

<sup>4</sup>See Christian Wolff. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pie\\_Raymond\\_R%C3%A9gamey](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pie_Raymond_R%C3%A9gamey).

<sup>5</sup>Jean-Christophe Stuccilli et alii. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain\\_Couturier](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain_Couturier).

<sup>6</sup>Actually, *L’Art Sacree* was reborn again and continued its activities until 1969 (see Françoise Caussé. <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/l-art-sacre-revue/>).

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From Canada, he fought for the liberation of France with the weapons he had at hand: his sermons, his speeches, his articles and – above all – his prayers.



**Figure3.** France, Father Couturier's homeland  
(Photo taken by the Author)

Furthermore, contacts were established with Marc Chagall, Jacques Lipchitz, Jacques Maritain and Henri Focillon. Opponent of academicism, Father Couturier considered that “all true art is sacred” (*tout art véritable est sacre*).<sup>7</sup> In June 1943, we find Father Couturier back in the United States: he is the military chaplain at the American base in Jacksonville, the most populous city of Florida.

In addition to his many activities (preaching, tutoring, teaching, lecturing), not only did Father Couturier provided spiritual assistance to numerous exiles and Americans as well, but he also continued to act in the field of art. In September, 1945, he landed back in his freed and beloved France. In 1954, Marie-Alain Couturier died of a neuromuscular disease and was mourned by several artists, religious and non-religious. He was 56 years old, a very young age for someone who had so much to give.

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<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Jean-Christophe Stuccilli et alii. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain\\_Couturier](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Alain_Couturier).