

ART

Art in service

There must be few art-lovers in South Africa who do not know the name of Cecil Skotnes. This trim-looking son of a Norwegian Salvation Army officer is recognised as the foremost wood-engraver in the country. He is also President of the South African Council of Artists, and as such, the official leader of local art. But it is unlikely that many are aware of his creative craftsmanship and guidance in church adornment across the land, or of the almost revolutionary nature of his participation in this field.

Indigenous spirit. Some six years ago, a Johannesburg architect, who has many churches to his credit, and of whom professional ethics demand that he shall be nameless, was engaged on the African Catholic Church at Kroonstad. Feeling that the symbolic articles should be more closely identified with the indigenous spirit than are the standard European importations, he and the Bishop turned for assistance to Skotnes, who was Director of the Polly Street Art-Centre for Africans. Thus began a pattern of reciprocal co-operation between artist, architect and Church, which has been rare in South Africa, indeed in Europe since the Industrial Revolution.

Teamwork. Skotnes' personal all-round accomplishment equipped him admirably for the diverse demands of church adornment, and his revival of the traditional practice of employing his students as apprentice under his guidance resulted in the emergence of the non-white professional artists, Sidney Kumalo and Ben Arnold.

Beginning at Kroonstad, where Kumalo assisted in designing the ceiling, and finally completed it alone, they next moved to Bothaville in the Orange Free State and worked on the Coloured church there. In Orlando, near Johannesburg, there stands a little Mission church, where Skotnes' African students carried out an original treatment of the Stations of the Cross, crudely and spontaneously modelled in cement. Unfortunately, this virile, indigenous expression has since been replaced by the most sentimental examples of repository art.

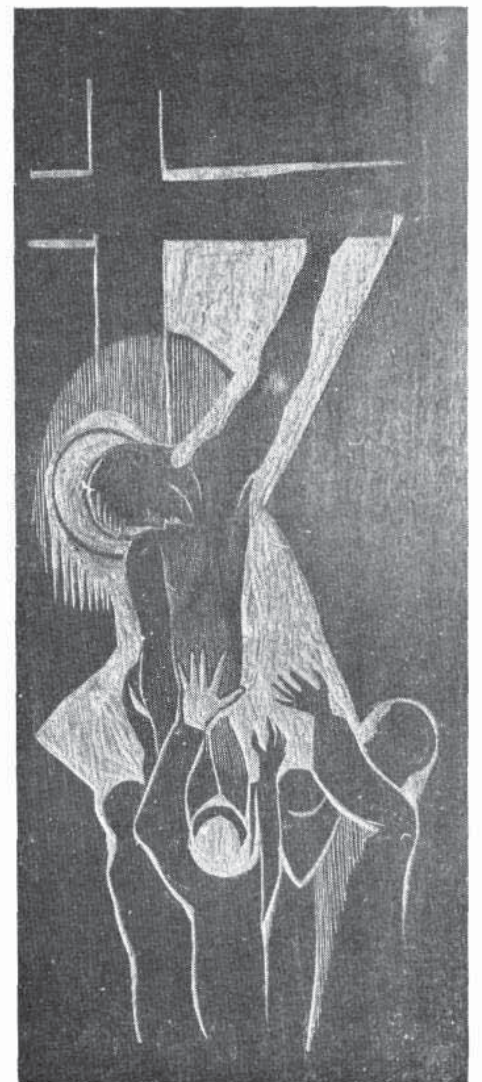
Old tradition. Skotnes' major personal contribution is in the African Catholic Church at Welkom, OFS. The altar-wall (see cut) is a reflection of the enlightened co-operation between priests, architect and artist: the congregation is predominantly Basuto, and the need



"APOCALYPTIC VISION" BY SKOTNES: ALTAR-WALL AT WELKOM
Horses for the Basuto congregation

was felt for a mural which would incorporate the maximum number of horses, dear to the Basuto heart. The subject chosen was the Apocalyptic Vision. Using an original technique, which is both bold and inexpensive (an essential requirement on these projects), Cecil Skotnes incised the design in the damp white plaster, then replaced the sections he had removed with an inlay of fresh plaster, tinted black. The whole concept is handled, not as a virtuoso example of his personal artistry, but as a valid form of visual education, such as conditioned Church art of the Middle Ages. Kumalo is responsible for the Stations of the Cross, and Arnold for a supplicant figure over the confessionals. Further examples of Skotnes' work adorn the simple Catholic Church in Rivonia, Johannesburg. His quiet treatment of the Stations, engraved in mahogany (see cut) are evidence of his sympathy with the architect's conception. Recently completed, is the Anglican Church of St Anne at Pigg's Peak, Swaziland. Here too, among his other contributions, his harmonious design for the altar-wall tapestry, woven by Marguerite Stephens (NEWS/CHECK, September 14), adds dignity to the simple building.

New vitality. On the drawing-board are plans for several new churches, which through this team-work from the very commencement of the project, should revitalize the old tradition of the church being the living expression of art in the highest service, and not the repository of inartistic symbolism, which it has become.



"THE DEPOSITION"—RIVONIA
Simplicity for the simple