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The Cover

The Church of Saint Séverin was painted by Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955) about 1913. This picture, with its cold gray light, typifies Utrillo's use of textures and his juxtaposition of geometric shapes. The world he paints is one of plaster and stone, usually empty of people and even of vegetation. After a careful study of the painting, one can see that the small, faceless people, far down the street, add no life to the scene; and one can strongly sense the tragic isolation of the lonely artist. On the left-hand side of the painting, the shutters and oddly shaped windows on the rough wall seem to have a life of their own, and look out at the view with a strange, forceful intensity. This could be called one of his more precise works. One could almost feel that this church held a special interest for the artist.

The Church of Saint Séverin is located in Paris, on the Rue Saint Séverin. This architectural gem was named after a pious hermit who lived in this spot in the sixth century. An oratory was first built in his honor, but it was later burned down by the Normans. It was replaced by a chapel and a church dedicated to another Séverin, a Swiss abbot, who was called to France by Clovis and miraculously cured the king. At the end of the 11th century, Saint Séverin was the parish church for the whole of the left bank. The present building was begun in the first half of the 13th century and was restored in the 16th century. The interior pillars are decorated with figures of angels and prophets, and noteworthy are the stained glass windows and frescoes. Leaving the church by the side door on the right, one enters a little garden overhung with chestnut trees, which cover the old cemetery, and is surrounded by ossuaries (depositories for bones of the dead). This is the only place in Paris where a visitor can still see these 15th century galleries.

Maurice Utrillo was the son of Suzanne Valadon, a painter much admired by Degas. She herself taught him to paint after trying without success to establish him in a banking career. Utrillo painted in a world completely isolated from the activity of life around him. He shows little influence from either the old masters or his contemporaries, though his clear, bright colors are those of the Impressionists. Many remember him as one of the famous street-scene painters of Paris.

—THOMAS J. HANDRIGAN

(*The Church of Saint Séverin*, 1913. Oil on canvas. 73.0×53.6 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.)

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