

# Richard Burde: Spiritual Reflections

Richard G. Oman and Doris R. Dant

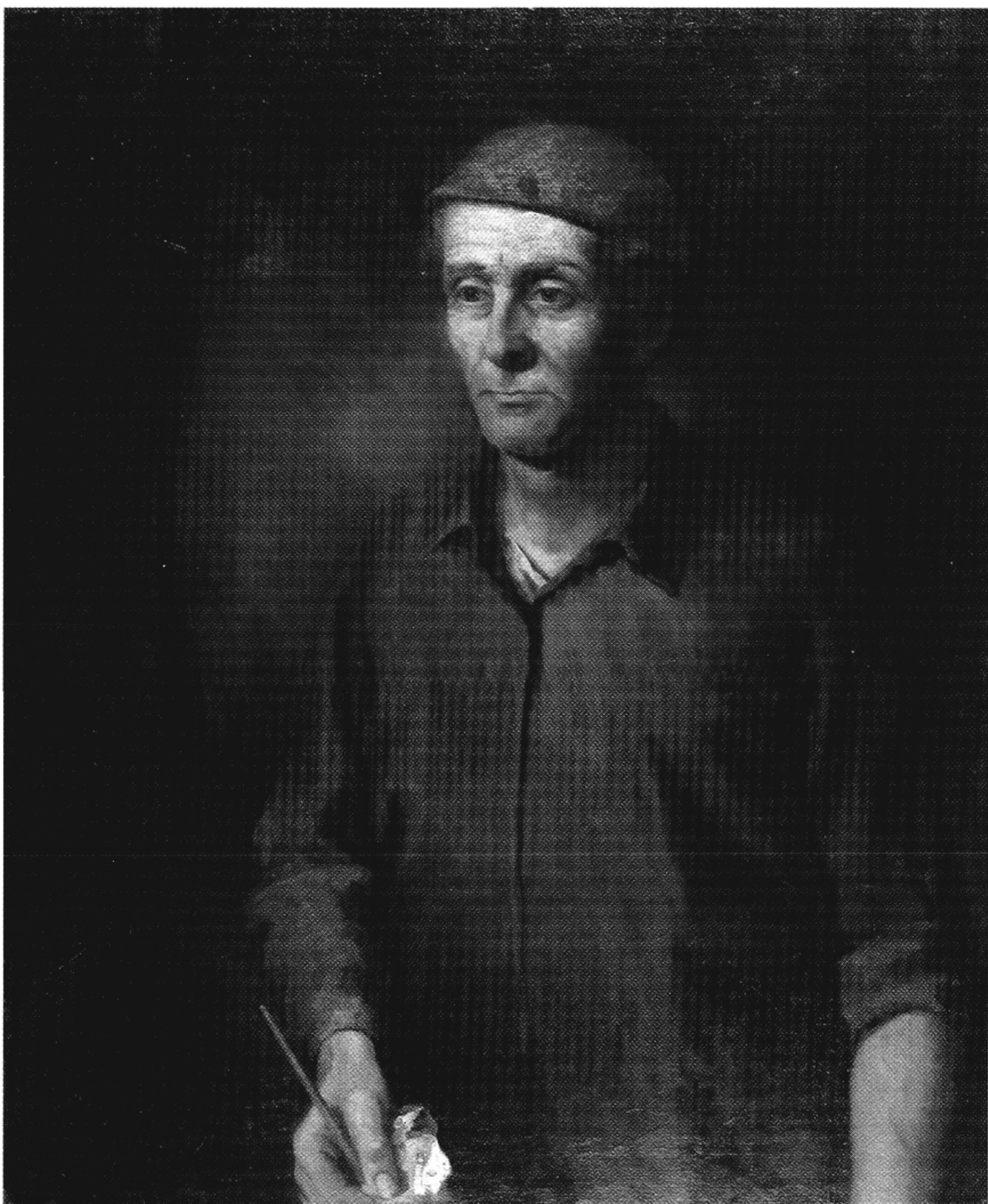
When many Mormons think of modern religious painters, they think of illustrators Arnold Friberg and Harry Anderson. Others might name artists Minerva Teichert or Wulf Barsch. Relatively few have heard of Richard Burde, a shy, introverted man who does his painting quietly and without fanfare in his home. Born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1912, he has over the years produced numerous religious paintings but has exhibited his works in Utah only twice.

The paintings reproduced here and on the cover of this issue are typical of Burde's shifting style, which variously draws on the sharply contrasted lights and darks of the Dutch Baroque, the moons and skies of American Romantics, and the bold, brightly colored shapes of postimpressionism. Linking all his works, however, is humility and compassion, strikingly mixed with emotional intensity and spiritual courage.

Burde studied four years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden. After being drafted into the German army, he fought on the Russian front, where he was severely wounded. In 1941 he was converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through the missionary efforts of a neighbor in Dresden. Later, he and his family escaped from East Germany and in 1952 made their way to the United States. Burde brought just a few paintings with him.

In America the artist was isolated from many of those around him by the unfamiliar language and culture, by his shyness, and sometimes by economics. However, he has maintained a regular study of the scriptures and of European and classical thought and cultural arts. The resulting introspection enhances the process of likening the scriptures to himself. Thus the Good Samaritan takes the traveler to a German inn, Mary and Joseph are a German peasant couple sharing an intimate moment with their new baby, and, in a painting not shown here, Joseph Smith is a German scholar studying the scriptures. We are invited to likewise reflect upon our relationships with the Lord and our fellow humans.

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Richard Burde, *Self-portrait*. Oil on canvas, 29" x 24 1/2", 1971. Courtesy of the artist.

Burde is dressed in the traditional costume of European artists.



**Richard Burde, *Judith*.** Oil on canvas, 29" x 24 1/2", 1972. Photograph is slightly cropped. Courtesy of the artist.

To save her besieged city, the beautiful widow Judith put herself in the hands of the Lord and made her way to the enemy camp. Bedecked in her finest, she gained entré to the tent of the general, Holofernes. Here she is shown calmly holding Holofernes' weapon just prior to cutting off his head. When the general's death was discovered, the army was so demoralized it fled, and Israel was saved. Along with Esther, Judith is a hero of the Jewish people.

Burde used his granddaughter as a model for Judith.



Richard Burde, *The Prophet Elijah and the Priests of Baal*. Oil on canvas, 15" x 17", 1946. Courtesy of the artist.

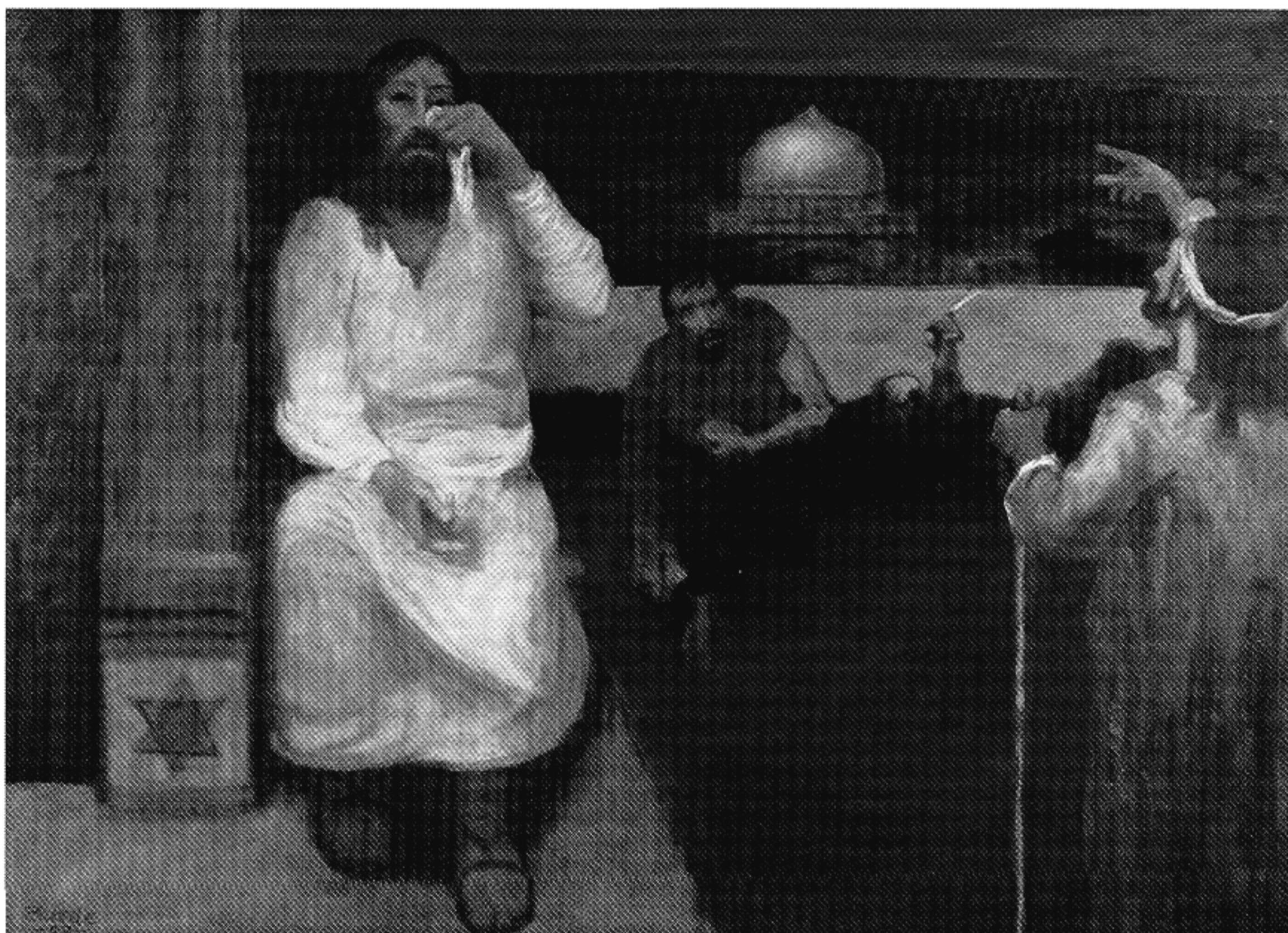
Burde captures the climax of the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal to prove whose god is the true God. In answer to Elijah's prayer, Jehovah sends lightning to consume the thrice-soaked sacrificial offering, the wood, and even the altar stones.

This painting is one of the few that the artist brought with him to the United States when he immigrated.



Richard Burde, *"Thy Sins Are Forgiven."* Oil on board, 11 1/2" x 16", 1969. Courtesy of the artist.

Simon the Pharisee has accused Christ of allowing a known sinner to touch him, for she has washed Christ's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Christ responds, "I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much." Just as much of the world disregards Christ's message of salvation, the serving woman has turned her back to this drama.



Richard Burde, *Christ Lamenting Jerusalem That Kills the Prophets*. Oil on canvas, 35" x 48", 1993. Courtesy of the artist.

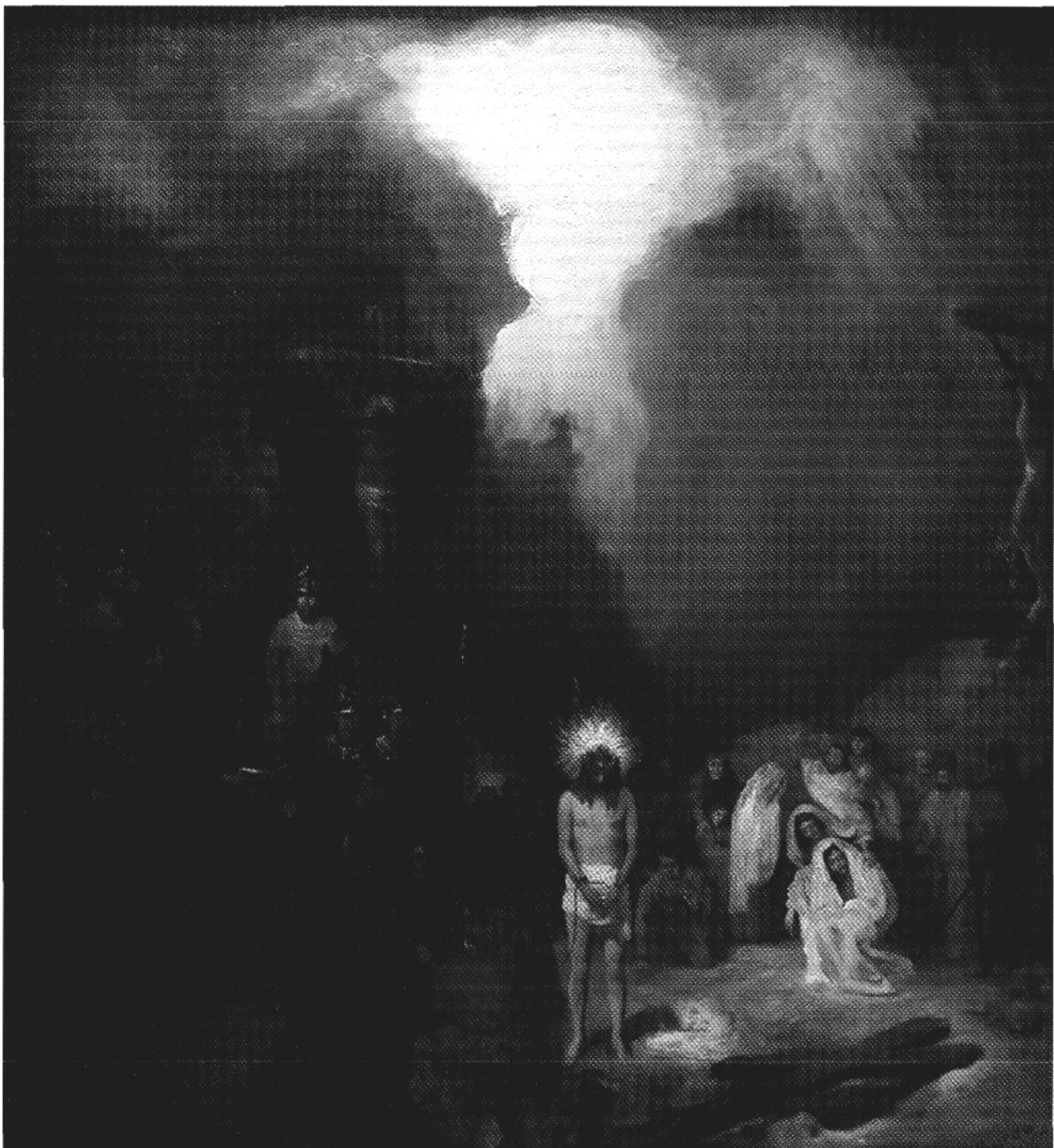
This painting is based on Matthew 23:37–38, where Christ prophetically laments, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”

Rather than depicting the Jerusalem of Christ’s time, the artist has painted a later Jerusalem, where other buildings are erected but the destroyed temple is left desolate. The physical resemblance between Christ and the man with the stone—Christ’s spiritual brother—underscores the contrast in their earthly actions.



Richard Burde, *Christ in Gethsemane*. Oil on canvas, 10" x 15", 1959. Location unknown.

The only one who could atone for human sins, Jesus Christ is shown isolated, with the universe weighing upon him. The photograph reproduced here is apparently the only surviving image of Burde's conception of the Lord's agony in Gethsemane.



**Richard Burde, *Christ in Majesty*.** Oil on canvas, 41 1/2" x 37 3/4", 1967. Courtesy of Museum of Church History and Art.

Through the dramatic use of light, shadow, and composition, Burde masterfully focuses on the heroic quality of Christ in chains on Calvary. The artist has placed the forces for evil in the dark and the forces for good in the light with Christ at the boundary between light and darkness.

This work of art expresses the artist's profound religious faith and his European cultural heritage. Showing an excellent understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch Baroque art in the style of Rembrandt, this is perhaps Burde's finest painting.



**Richard Burde, *The Nativity*.** Oil on canvas, 10" x 14", 1968. Photograph is cropped. Courtesy of Pamela Oman.

Mary and Joseph are painted as a German peasant couple in a German barn. Burde is following a tradition in German art of localizing a scriptural story to help people personally relate to it.