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Modern Archeology

Probably the farthest limit of archeological pursuit has been reached with the present attempts to recover the frescoes painted by Aleister Crowley in Cefalù, Sicily, a good thirty years ago. Crowley, an English diabolist and dark counterfoil to the Bright Young People, became a tabloid hero of the 'twenties, sometimes known as "the wickedest man in the world." Hell bent for magic and a nod at Rabelais, he established what he called his Abbey of Thelema in a Sicilian farmhouse, and covered the walls and doors with a fleshy riot of bawdy scenes and grotesques. Against this background took place what the contemporary press described as love-cult orgies and black-magic rituals. Soon the police put an end to this early form of social group work by ordering Crowley and his followers to leave Italy. The inspirational painted background of Crowley's occult revels was whitewashed and the farmhouse was locked up.

Recently, Kenneth Anger, an American producer-director of documentary films, who is an enthusiastic collector of Crowleyana, rediscovered the abandoned Abbey of Thelema and set about scraping and peeling the whitewash from the mural paintings. Crowley, the all-around occultist, composed his own ritual and painted his own cult icons. As cult painter to himself he went in less for symbols than for graphic representations of the passion after Beelzebub, which turns out to be the same old thing, only more scabrous. Deliberately intended to shock, the paintings were designed to weed out acolytes too conformist to make good infernal timber. The figures are brilliantly colors, loose-jointedly Expressionistic. Though Crowley the painter had a certain notoriety in his generation, mainly because of his lubricious themes, and had a great success with his New York exhibition, not entirely because of the intrinsic quality of his work, few of his easel paintings have survived. Their loss is due principally to Nazi intolerance of competition, for they burnt all the paintings Crowley sent to Berlin for exhibition in the 'thirties, presumably because they preferred domestic to imported pornography. Historically this may prove to be their only unlamented atrocity. The restored frescoes in Cefalù undoubtedly

will attract more visitors—if the authorities permit—than the recent finds at Piazza Amerina in Sicily of ancient mosaics showing girls in bikinis.