

THE TIMELESS AND THE TIMEBOUND IN ART

A Paper on the Problem of
Daily Life and the Value of Forms in Art.

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We can measure the veracity of a philosophical statement, the poetic power of a diction, the formal quality of a work of art only in so far as we can integrate its immanent content into our own vital experience. We cannot contribute anything of value to the world of ideas and artistic concepts except in this manner. It is the only way, the creative way. All else is intellectualism and education. For the purpose of this paper, it may, therefore, be permissible to use - though with caution - that ominous formula "I". I may also be allowed slightly to adjust the phrasing of our problem - Daily Life and the Value of Forms in Art - so as to clarify its meaning for my purpose. To me, it is not so much a question of the forms in which the art of any single culture manifests itself in its urge to give it its own expression, its peculiar character. It is, to me, more the question of the influence on art of the forms of life; those enigmatic, unchanging and strangely accomplished, unique forms of life, the infinite variety of which is an inexhaustible source of experience and knowledge. To me, more burning than the elaboration of a modern style in architecture, its influence on the arts and crafts and the co-operation of painting and sculpture in this effort, is the question: What has happened to the visual appearances of life in our generation in which the artist refuses to use these eternal forms of Being, these primary manifestations of vision and touch as a direct source of

inspiration? It seems as if he were afraid of them and by disguising them - like de Chirico, Léger, Moore - were making them acceptable, in a metamorphosed form, and only then, to his own inexplicable anxiety.

In my early youth, during the somewhat disorderly and tumultuous years after the first world war, every-day life - "der Alltag" - appeared to us young writers and artists in Central Europe as a degradation of life itself. It was a life of the adult, tied up in economic considerations, the life of politicians, generals, engineers and bus drivers, of petit bourgeois illusions and the craving for safety, all adding up to a narrow outlook of boredom and banality. I am inclined to think that every young creative person, in whatever country and in whatever period, even in a peaceful and accomplished one, must have encountered the same experience. There was Existence, however, true Existence, the eternal manifestation of the mysterious and hidden will which had brought forth the miracle of life, its manifold forms and hieroglyphics. Life was the great enigma, it was love and hate and meditation, it was creation, and only in art were those immortal traces to be found by which man's spirit sought to unravel its riddle through forms and capture its beauty. Art was the dialogue between man and creation; man who was a part of it and yet something more: the witness, before man and God, of this great living reality.

The artist was a witness. The witness of the glory of Being. The Darwinian formula did not appeal to us, nor did that of Einstein. We did not wish to replace the divine by a biological or a mathematical formula. This was left to the generation following us, a generation which treated all idealistic notions as mere illusions, not as powerful vehicles of the mind and the will, which re-

jected life's own appearances and substituted the wholeness of subject and object by introvert vision alone, elemental shapes by abstract forms, -- all in rebellion against the meaning and the finality of every single spatial form in creation, were it mineral, plant, animal or astronomic.

It was Goethe who once said to Boisserée that direct vision of things was everything for him. ~~He wrote~~ "The highest of all things would be to understand that all that is concrete is already theory... It is essential not to try and go behind phenomena; they are themselves the doctrine." When I first came to Paris as a youth, it embodied for me the great spirit of directness and clarté of the French. There the natural forms themselves were apprehended. They were not just pretexts for the beyond. In other words: one saw. One did not only think speculatively as was the case East of the Rhine. Now, after so many years, we find ourselves confronted even in Paris with a world in which the primary motive power is not seeing but knowing, ~~and feeling~~ the behind and the beyond, the vagueness or presumed precision of scientific or philosophic-aesthetic, or psychological, of Germanic or Far Eastern notions. Innocence of vision no longer exists. The clearly defined visual concepts have been replaced by concepts reminiscent of Otto Weininger's Henides -- shapeless notions, not yet crystallized, which the young Weininger ascribed mainly to the thought-process of women in which a blending of emotion and cognition takes place without the will and the power for formative definition.

In practically all countries, more than half of the production of the visual arts to-day is abstract in one form or another. This has never before happened in the history of mankind. It is certain that a comparison between our abstract expression and the emergence of the abstract phase of, say, Neolithic art with its symbolic significance will not prevail before a historically well-founded

criticism. Our abstract art has a more analytical apart from its symptomatic character; only to a very limited degree does it possess that symbol-craving quality of primitive mentality which was dictated by an inner necessity. Frequently, however, and to a much larger extent, a similarity with the decorative arts of Islam, a dependence upon mainly primitive sources of art, on the pictographic and ideographic stages of writing throughout the world comes to the fore. An abstract artist whose judgment I believe to be honest, has repeatedly declared in all seriousness that 99% of abstract art to-day is not art at all but an acquired attitude and a fashion demanding very little true effort and exploiting a trend which offers quick recognition.

Let me approach the problem of abstraction by way of somewhat geometric terms. There is a horizontal line of relationship in the evolution of art, tradition - which in our investigation denotes the fact that any new idea constituting the starting point for a next step, a further exploration, a further specialization of its revolutionary content, has its roots in previous developments. That is how analytical Cubism grew out of a Cézanne notion, geometric abstract art out of analytical Cubism and organic abstract art out of a protest against the one-sided geometric concept, etc. The emphasis in painting on action rather than on the result, on the artist rather than the work, is a direct deduction from a former position with its acceptance of the non-art quality of art as stated by Surrealism. Malraux has contended that "the most naive sculptor of the High Middle Ages, like the contemporary painter obsessed with history, when inventing a system of forms, derived it neither from their submission to nature nor from their own feeling, but owed it to their conflict with another art form... That one may become a painter not before the most beautiful woman but before the most beautiful picture."

I do not suggest that Malraux is unaware of a line of relationship other than the horizontal. He emphasizes, however, and necessarily so for his research, the direction towards the historic, the horizontal line; ~~we~~ we must emphasize in our present investigation the direction towards the lost world of visual experience.

Is there then yet another line of relationship besides the horizontal line? Yes, most certainly there is, and it is indeed the most important one without which there can be no profound experience at all. To the extent that it is primary it is also subjective -- for it is not given to us to recognize the eternal in an objective way -- and it is our contention that there is not and cannot be any true art without the experience of this primary and subjective relationship. We speak of the vertical line of relationship, the relationship between man and creation experienced anew in every single individual and every single generation as t h e irreplaceable happening without which there is no inner life. As a tree grows vertically and cannot exist without its roots, so man's mind cannot work creatively unless his roots reach into the consciousness of Being, unless they are nourished by the springs of the primary and of subjective humanism.

When in the modern development of art subject-matter was dismissed as being literary, what was dismissed, or rather what should have been dismissed only was the traditionalist concept of reality, not however the whole form world of phenomena. This would seem to us a grave error in logic on the part of a movement which is distinguished by a very logical development. Although subject-matter came back into modern art, it did not achieve that elemental

power which is the essence of each individual primary vision.

What a unique experience - this experience of "seeing", for the first time, a flower, a bird, the moon! The sensation, for the first time, of the smell of reseda, of freshly baked bread, and the sound of the sea at night! To feel the gentle softness of a woman's breast, to dip one's hand into the water, for the first time. What is this unknown element of water, cool and evasive, which yields to my hand? The wind plays on its surface, the light penetrates it and changes its colour in the depth. H_2O is its cerebral aspect. But can it define its appeal to the senses? What is a pear? Its ripe form like the tender shape of a hip, its mat surface like a look veiled by sorrow, the sweet scent of its flesh, the taste of its juice. Without having experienced it, what can we say? Do you see how far we get with logic alone? Not very far. Neither in art nor in philosophy. Modern thought building on logical positivism cannot go a step further than the ironic knowledge of the old Greek Cynics: that a pear is a pear. Tautology, not cognition. It is the senses which are the doors of perception to human and artistic experience. A definition can name a thing, but without life's experience there is no content. The form ~~identifies~~ identifies it. The final shapes of nature so supremely present in the first vision of a child or the primitive artist must have a meaning, a significance, or the life process would not have stopped where it did. To regain this faculty of seeing the appearances of life as though for the first time, this and only this will bring the efforts of modern art to fruition. Again - has not our generation in its continued thrust towards the primary, the elemental, the primitive, committed a similar error in logic when it confused the manner in which children reproduce their vision, with the vision itself? In most cases this has led not

to the rediscovery of the virgin vision in all its overpowering intensity but merely to a recapitulation of the child's way of giving it form. From that end we cannot reach it. We cannot become children again and, honestly, we do not want to. We do not want to neglect or diminish that mental process which lies between the primary impression and its mature, formal expression. [There are some paintings by Matisse where every single form is experienced for its own sake; not only as part of a compositional whole but as a manifestation of form per se. By the directness of his intuition the painter has here achieved a visual finality which we could call philosophic. It is as compact as any sentence of the Tao-Té-Ching, as deep and beautiful as a page from the Gilgamesh Epic, as holy as the Song of Bhagavad-Gita. Here forms of life are experienced as though seen for the first time. Here, the conceptual organ, the eye, has wrested the supremacy from the brain. Here, painting is painting and not science, or logic. Our senses possess a unique faculty and unless we use them primarily, whatever we may achieve in art will be non-art. Only the senses, by restating them, can humanize the forms of life, i.e. unveil their significance through the poetic process of creation and force it out of the anonymity which is the fate of life without witness.

In Matisse, to give but one example, modern man reached for the new, which is the eternal. For there is eternity in life; but styles and formulae in art are timebound. In the sequence of time, the timebound, changing quality of art can acquire the inner faculty of a rebirth to life only if in the secret process of crystallization it has reached into the timelessness of Being.

Why are styles and formulae in art timebound? Because it is the fate of human thought that it is fettered to its own pre-destined nature. Whatever problems man encounters in his individual life or in the life of his generation, they *com-*

pel him to embark on their solution, to enable him to survive. That is why Nietzsche conceived of the thinker as searching not for the truth but for the metamorphosis of the world in man. That is why we have dark ages and enlightened ages, times when the mind rules and others when the ratio dominates. Rarely times when a balance is achieved between the two. Whenever man tries to break through his own nature in thought, he arrives either at the bleak bones of logical analysis and semantics or at the notions of Platonic ideas, both estranged from life. Art alone can restate the visual essence of life itself. It can - but it does not yet do so in our time, because it is enslaved by the same chains of logic which shackle these particular schools of philosophy.

When Cézanne painted apples he perceived them with a struggling and troubled mind so as to regain the faculty of seeing; but he rendered them with the help of conventional laws of composition. The next step was taken by Matisse - to the roots, to the source of primary experience. It was not only a logical step in the horizontal direction; it was an essential step in the vertical direction. Every single artist will have to take this step or time will undo his art.

Abstraction has become the "Alltag" -- the every-day life of our presence in art. Unless we glorify life's forms in their ultimate significance, unless we reconcile emotionalism and analytical cerebralism in line, colour and handwriting with the finality of life's formative processes, we shall not be able to create an art which is congenial to the wholeness of life.