

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS

Fourth International Congress of Art Critics

D U B L I N

Newman House

20 - 26 July, 1953

SUMMARY REPORT

Opening Session, Monday 20th of July.

President : M. Paul FIERENS (Belgium)

Vice-Presidents : Messrs. Raymond COGNAT (France), Pierre COURTHION (Switzerland), Sir Herbert READ (Great Britain), J.J. SWEENEY (United States), Lionello VENTURI (Italy).

Rapporteur General : Mr. Thomas Mc GREEVY (Ireland)

General Secretary : Mme S. GILIE-DELAFFON (France)

General Secretary of the Congress : Mr. James WHITE (Ireland)

UNESCO representative : Mr. Peter BELLEW, of the Arts and Letters division.

Mr. Thomas Mc GREEVY, president of the Irish section, greeted Congress members and introduced Mr. P.J. LITTLE president of the Irish Arts Council who, in the name of the Government of the Republic, welcomed to Ireland the Art Critics on the occasion of the fourth Congress.

M. Paul FIERENS, president of the International Association of Art Critics, expressed the critics gratitude to the Irish Government representative for the encouragement given in the organization of the Dublin Congress. Most of the members of the congress were only imperfectly acquainted with the riches Ireland has to offer them in their own domain. He thanked the Congress organizers, Mme GILIE-DELAFFON and Mr. James WHITE, and all the speakers who had prepared reports on the agenda. He also referred to the fruitful contacts established between UNESCO and the Association, and his satisfaction that the IAAC now belonged to the non-governmental organizations admitted to UNESCO under its consultative statutes. He was convinced that the IAAC could render great service to UNESCO in the domain of Art, and concluded by saying that the Irish have an ideal of independence which Art critics are proud to emulate.

The PRESIDENT then announced that the session would be devoted to the study of theme I : The relations of a work of art to the artistic culture of the time. Those dealing with this theme were Messrs. VENTURI, FRANCASTEL, READ and ROH. M. VENTURI, head of the Italian group, was called on to speak.

M. Lionello VENTURI (Italy) sought to establish a distinction between the creative imagination of the great artists, the relations between great minds of different epochs, Phidias, Raphaël; and that which, in their work, is the result of the political, moral, literary and musical climate of the epoch at which each one lived. The problem to be solved is the relation between the form and the background of works which are considered eternal. On the other hand it is well known that there are works which contemporaries considered masterpieces but which posterity has rejected. It must be realised that there are relations between a work of art and a civilization which might be the very reason for the eternal value of that work of art. Is not the eternal work of art that which, more than all others, represents a civilization, or creates a civilization ?

In his report, M. Pierre FRANCASTEL, (France) wondered if it was true that the artist really does create his civilization ? Art is a fundamental function in society. There is no completely isolated art. The relations between Form and Background can therefore be restated within the framework of a study on the general function of the sign in societies. If art be placed in the same category as other human languages, we are led to conceive of a second problem distinct from relations between art and other modes of expression : - the universe created by the artist is always both an expression of his epoch and of so-called eternal values, which may be defined sometimes by their relation with the past, sometimes with the future. An entirely new plastic language without any associations with forms of the past would be unintelligible to contemporaries and so inefficacious. Besides, the value of a work of art is only shown by the effect it has. A work of art has its place both in the history of a technique and in the general history of human societies. The basic point is to know whether man, in history, only approaches in varying degrees certain ideal prototypes, or whether, on the contrary he is not rather the creator of his universe. We understand Phidias and Raphaël today because they transformed into action a potential ordering of sensations corresponding to the technical knowledge and theoretical speculations of their time. What the artist creates is the mode of expression of a lasting and ineradicable form of his experience.

Sir Herbert READ (Great Britain) thought that the study of this theme must lead one to consider one of the most misunderstood problems in the history of art : the problem of the Zeitgeist. It was the Germans who, more aware than anyone of the importance of this problem, coined the word to describe it adequately. The Zeitgeist is obviously the essential point of the discussion. Each age has its own definition of what is beautiful, and if the aesthetic value of "beauty" is denied then we are ready with a substitute value which we may call "vitality" or "realism". The values of art are subject to variations. There are no values in art which have not been challenged, but this condition of relativity should not blind us to the fact that there are certain values to which the world keeps returning. These values may be few but are fundamental : for example the geometrical proportions and those qualities of harmony and serenity to which man returns after every period of storm. The variations of these values may be ascribed to distortions of a temporary nature whose origin may be sought in the economic sphere. In times of social change the cultural values of a dominant class do not always correspond to their social status. At that moment the Zeitgeist is born and finds expression in certain works of art which suddenly come into fashion and which no power of reason or good taste can remedy.

The speaker draws the following moral from all this; that fashions in art are always to be mistrusted :- the fame of the most fashionable artists of any period does not survive that period, and the best artists of any period have a posthumous fame out of all proportion to their contemporary fame.

The Zeitgeist of our own time can be summed up under four headings. EGOISM the prevailing subjectivism of all forms of art; ERETHISM, excessive excitation of sensibility; ECLECTICISM, tendency to make, both of poetry and of painting, a mythological salad (e.g. the "Waste Land", "Guernica", the theatre of Giraudoux and Cocteau); ESCAPISM, tendency to evade the human dilemma, the tragic sense of life.

Mr. Franz ROH (Germany) explained how, after much research, he came to publish his book on "The history of Misunderstanding in Art" (Munich, 1948). There are 3 different kinds of artist present in almost all periods; the definitely conservative, the definitely avant-garde, and those on a middle line. Similarly there are 3 kinds of public and 3 kinds of critics to correspond. The works most easily understood are those which are conservative within their time. Every new type of art produces a negative reaction in the public. This is inevitable because the best artists are always in advance of their time.

The critics' job is to make the public understand that art is in a perpetual state of evolution. There is an inertia in the public's reaction which keeps it behind the times. The conservative spirit is more dangerous than the desire for novelty. The public must learn to consider each new mode of form, at each period, as a new language.

A theory of Relativity is necessary which leaves "eternal values" out of account, since eternity cannot be evaluated. What really exist are functional values for certain periods.

M. Raymond COGNAT (France) wondered if there really was such a thing as an "eternal" work of art. Raphaël was not always admired. The Greek art preferred today is different from that which was appreciated in the eighteenth century. Are there not periods when the artist creates in harmony with his time? In classical periods the artist is in harmony with his time, whereas in a romantic individualistic period the artist's mission is to seek new and personal forms even at the risk of provoking a scandal. In so doing he involuntarily expresses the spirit of his time and its collective aspirations. So it seems difficult to find a "definitive" definition.

The further development of theme I was carried over to the following day.

Second plenary session

Tuesday 21st of July

M. Lionello VENTURI continued the study of theme I. He thought that if art is to embody eternal forms it must be in contact with obscure forces and not just be satisfied with communications from Nature. He thought, too, that it was an error to hold, as M. FRANCASTEL did, that a universal language would be inefficacious. An art which remains unintelligible comes perhaps nearest to eternal truths.

Mme Lydie KRESTOVSKI was of the opinion that though it is debatable, whether works of art cease to be eternal, it is true to say that certain ideas, certain values, subsist.

Mme Giusta NICCO-FASOLA (Italy) was astonished that art critics who devote the best part of their time to contemporary art continue to attach so much importance to certain outdated axioms according to which, for instance, the same circumstances always have the same effects, and that forms of art are used again and again by one and another artist. In this case how is it that the Renaissance, which is considered as one great entity, is not the same in the Low Countries as in Italy? The old philological system is too easily inclined to look for certain forms which resemble one another and which might well be the cause of one another. We ought to be on our guard against the inventors of influences.

Mr. S. KEMAL-YETKIN (Turkey) proposed substituting the word "lasting" for "eternal". The value of works of art is continually changing. This is confirmed by the example of great critics who were mistaken about the works of art of their time which are now considered masterpieces. The background is considered separately from the form, hence the relativity.

The PRESIDENT then announced that the meeting would pass on to theme 3 : "The relations between Science and Art". In the absence of M. FRANCASTEL, M. LEYMARIE was called on to speak.

M. Jean LEYMARIE (France) explained that as he had prepared no report on this theme, he would discuss M. FRANCASTEL's text.

M. LEYMARIE started by explaining the point of view of the rapporteurs, in particular that of Mr. FRANCASTEL whose research had led him towards the sociology of art and its connection with the cultural anthropology of the time. In the speaker's own opinion the theme of the relations between art and science was a philosophical problem; perhaps even the major philosophical problem, in so far as philosophy is the search, at every epoch, for a possible harmony between the two primordial functions of humanity : art and science; that is to say the function of knowledge and the function of creation. In a digression on the subject of Seurat, he pointed out that in his opinion the critical appreciation of this painter was still an open problem. M. Venturi had recently shown how Seurat's work exemplified the architectural nostalgia and geometrical obsession of his time. With regard to the habitual debates between art critics, M. LEYMARIE reminded his audience that Braque said that the nature of Science was to reassure, and that of Art, to disconcert. Critics were trying to express themselves by means of a vocabulary which bore the weight of an outworn rationalistic heritage, they were still only philologists and not yet linguists. Linguistics should be considered one of the determining sciences of the period, whereas many people continued to believe in the virtues of dialectics. At the present time we are in a period of chaos, as often happens periodically at crucial moments of human history, and which give rise to the greatest flowering of art.

Second Session
(continued)

Wednesday, 22nd of July

M. Jean IEYMARIE continued the study of theme 3. He took up one of Sir Herbert READ's questions :- "Whether or not the sythetizing activity of the present time on the part of most intellectual disciplines corresponds to a profound need of the time, or whether it is just a passing fashion". In the speaker's own opinion it corresponds to a profound need of the time, each one trying in this period of chaos, to rediscover the lost unity of the world; and first and foremost, the artists themselves.

The names of Phidias and Raphaël have been classed among the eternal values which this Congress has been discussing. For the contemporary period we can add Cézanne. The name of Cézanne cannot be excluded from the imaginary museum which so many people are talking about nowadays. The historical importance of Seurat is greater than his aesthetic value, while Cézanne's aesthetic value is ahead of his historical importance. The geometry of Cézanne's work has been greatly stressed, though the artist denied it all his life and strove to follow Nature. A new appreciation of Cézanne is essential.

If art and science are complementary, it is certain that analogies exist as much in a certain general orientation of the mind for a given period of history as in the form of human knowlegde and beliefs. Research in this direction might lead to the study of concrete cases particularly in the field of contemporary art, for instance the case of abstract art, in which there are certain aspects, like perspective during the Renaissance, tied up with the development of the new science, the new geometry. The speaker refused to commit himself on the subject of abstract art before the completion of the archives of contemporary art. It would then be possible to judge whether abstract art belonged to a passing fashion, or whether it was uniquely part of the sensibility of the time. The question was still an open one. The important thing seemed to be to substitute for literary doctrine an analytical, psychological and sociological doctrine which does not show simply superficial and passing analogies, but reveals the deeper significance of human endeavour. The speaker thought, however, that it was impossible to get to the bottom of reality and of the meaning of human endeavour by means of an analytical conception, and in this he differed from M. FRANCASTEL. It seemed to him that there was a contradiction between the latter's research and the object of that research. Whilst there is no separation between the scientific attitude and the philosophical attitude. A work of art seems to be placed at the meeting point between different planes, some of which are historical, some technical; some in the present, others in the past or even the future. The privilege of the artist and the scientist is to speak to groups of people who do not necessarily coincide with groups of people in contemporary society. The critic is faced with the dilemma put forward by UNESCO; to know whether he is a passive witness, or whether he can participate in the creative activity of his epoch.

The PRESIDENT thanked M. IEYMARIE for having given both a commentary and a critical report, and announced that M. PEDROSA would continue the study of theme 3. When he presented his report at the next session.

Third Session

Friday 24th of July

The PRESIDENT declared the session open and called on M. PEDROSA.

M. Marjo PEDROSA (Brazil) first of all observed that in tackling the problem of the relations between art and science, the degree of autonomy already attained, within the limits of social, political and economic conditioning, must first be established. In Art, this autonomy is a recent conquest which dates from the impressionist revolution. The artistic phenomenon has only been isolated, and analysed as such, in recent history. Cézanne foresaw the nature of artistic reality when he claimed, for the artist, the right to find in things his "little sensation". M. Venturi pointed out the specific artistic qualities of the impressionist masters; Cubism gave a new dignity to the work achieved, and the cubist canvas is a world in itself, with its laws and its events. Abstract art is the culmination of this long journey of the artistic phenomenon towards autonomy, by doing without the object, or in only retaining its imprints in space. Thus Art has got free of its secular servitude and stands before us for the first time as an end in itself. It is no longer confused with magic, religion, politics or fashion, and it is judged according to its own laws and needs. In this evolution we can trace a parallel between the overthrow of the most solidly established notions of the physical world, space time and matter, accomplished by modern mathematics and physics, and the triumph of so-called abstract art in its independence of surrounding nature. Modern art tends, like science, to free itself from the domination of perception and even the experience of the senses. The artist tends, like a geometrician working in space, to create veritable mathematical beings. Art has turned its back on Nature and rejected Renaissance canons, and by refusing to continue exterior representation it turns its back also on ancient science, on the old Euclidian conceptions of space.

The first phase in the modern movement of art was the systematic freeing of art from the old conceptual impression and the bringing together of the artist and the sensation. In the last phase art comes nearer to Science and claims for itself also the right to be a vehicle of knowledge. It can no longer be limited to expressive functions, it suppresses the object and thereby goes beyond the point of departure of direct immediate perception: art thus tends to bring us new conceptions of ideal objects which may be compared to the formal units of precise signification such as the gestalts in the chemico-physical world and physico-mathematical structures, and the intuitive essences in the modern terminological sense.

The new art is nowadays almost a sort of rival of science. This rivalry was expressed at the Cubist period, by the desire to figure as a world of autonomous knowledge. Within the precise limits which define several branches of modern science, such as mathematics, semantics and psychology, modern art can establish very fruitful relations with science. But science, and the advent of modern art show above all that the era of systematic exclusivist rationalism is past. Modern science, in spite of its audacity, is incapable of giving a synthesis to its own views. Art should reject the methods of science and try to win over the mind to a new-symbolical mode of thought.

The PRESIDENT thanked the speaker for having situated modern art in relation to science and contemporary thought, and informed the meeting that the study of this theme would be taken up again at the next congress.

The President announced that a report on theme 4 "Art Criticism through the Film Medium" would be given by Mr. SWEENEY at the session devoted to art films.

Third Session
(continued)

Friday 24th of July

Mr. James-Johnson SWEENEY (United States) supposed that the theme "Art Criticism through the Film Medium" was introduced into the Congress program less as a topic for debate than as an encouragement of the aims envisaged in this field. If we accept as basic objectives of art criticism the stimulation of wider and deeper appreciation of works of art, the film medium is an obvious channel for this. Its growing alliance to television promises in the very near future to become the broadest power of popular education.

These were the reasons which led Mr. SANDBERG of Amsterdam to associate the International Art Film Centre with the Amsterdam Municipal museum which he directs. The same reasons led the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New-York to approve in principle the project of an Art film laboratory proposed by the speaker. The New-York museum of modern Art has a long established depository of films and a service for putting them at the disposal of museums and schools throughout the United States. However no work has been done by that institution in the production of films on art. The Guggenheim Museum Trustees agreed that valuable critical and teaching service could be performed through a research laboratory in art film techniques and a programmatic production of films in connection with contemporary painting and sculpture.

The speaker believed that film makers as technicians would best know how to render critical and analytical ideas in their own visual medium of the film. For this reason we urged them to make proposals with entire freedom. Art-historical or art-critical control could come later. The key question in the matter of art films and art criticism through the film medium seems to be this : is the film which is dominated by a literary approach, and which tries to explain a work of art in its terms, not an added means to the confusion of the layman ? The tendency in art films since the war is towards an overloading of explanations or else a fantastic composition of the elements of a painting - in the manner initiated by Emmer - which loses sight of the total work of art. Such a documentation and such a fantastic development do not add any true depth to the layman's appreciation and rather create just another barrier between the observer and the actual work of art.

The art film is a fertile stimulant to the appreciation of painting, sculpture and other art expressions, but not in the literary character it has taken up to now, which is only a subordinate element of film expression much as conventional naturalistic representation was in painting and sculpture. When a purification is achieved then we envisage a true critical contribution in the film medium; till then films of art will remain in the category of journalism or documentation.

Fourth Session

Saturday 25th of July

The PRESIDENT announced that the session would be devoted to the study of theme 2 : "Theme and subject matter in the Plastic art of our time".

The speakers present were Messrs. COURTHION, Mc.GREEVY and SWEENEY, and it was announced that there would also be a short address by M. KEMAL YETKIN.

M. Pierre COURTHION (Switzerland) first defined the exact meaning today of subject and theme. The subject is a representational motif which can have varying importance. The theme is a proposition which the artist undertakes to discuss. It is the catalyst of pure artistic expression. These two means of exteriorizing artistic creation have existed in the past either in parallel form or together. The "Rape of the Sabine women" by Nicolas Poussin is both a historical representation of the subject of the Rape, and a counterpoint of rhythms on the theme of pursuit. The artist nowadays rejects subject and concentrates on theme. (Example of theme-picture : composition by Paul Klee called, "Left-right"). In the two approaches the same creative process is at work. Poussin and Klee both draw from intuition. This intuition is above all a transcending of deductive knowledge.

Those who substitute for the free play of talent a puritanical method with rules and recipes, must be considered as denying to Art its essential and specific power and creating a pseudo-mathematical demonstration. Thus in the works of the die-hard abstracts the organization of the picture is carried to the point of excluding the theme : it exists for itself and becomes sterile through its depersonalization. There is an academic abstraction parallel to the academic abuse of subject-matter. In what way is the theme necessary to the plastic arts ? The theme would seem to be that which leads and controls the artist's effusion. It is the theme which gives particular form to a composition. We can therefore draw the conclusion that the absence of subject-matter from almost all the best productions of the plastic arts in our time proves that it is possible to do without it. As for the theme, it is inherent in the creation of a work of art, and cannot disappear without striking at the very cohesion of artistic expression.

Mr. Thomas Mc GREEVY (Ireland), expressed partial agreement on the proposed distinction between subject-matter and theme. However the speaker envisaged a philosophical approach to all imaginative works of art.

Ireland could boast of a great painter, Jack B. YEATS, who has been described as a "romantic impressionist". This valid description nevertheless fails to explain why Yeats is one of the greatest colourists in the history of painting. When the artist rejects figurative representation the critic is placed before a dilemma. Unless no key is available to the themes of an abstract artist, his compositions and colours can only be judged as technical exercises. Chopin's preludes and etudes were composed as finger-exercises but Alfred Cortot goes as far as to give musical and even literary interpretations of them. He gives them a human as well as a technical sense. Who would dare to do the same thing with Braque, Picasso, Gris, Gleizes, etc... ? Admittedly or not, this is what in fact the majority of critics do. The natural gifts of a great artist are a mystery, and it is not irrational to attribute the themes he exploits, to his milieu. Thus Matisse remains in the most lasting traditions of French

painting. In the same way, Yeats used his gifts to beautify and ennoble through his painting a world which he knew, at a time when that world was little known. But is it possible to find a link between the thoughtful art of Braque and the passion for analysis which has always been a characteristic of Paris, and particularly the Paris of the Bergson period. Can the explosive art of Picasso be linked up with Braque's Paris, and with the Spain in ferment in which Picasso grew up, and even perhaps with the fact that translations of Nietzsche appeared in Catalonia during his years of formation? It can be done.

In abstract art, as in figurative art, there is an element of theme or subject - matter closely related to a given artist's milieu or background. Pessimists complain that God, Nature, and man himself have nowadays disappeared from art. But today Rouault remains, and it is possible that Vuillard and Bonnard, who continued to invest simple everyday scenes with the dignity of great painting, will come to be considered as the heroic figures of French art in the first half of the twentieth century. How many eighteenth century Parisians could have believed that two hundred years later Chardin would be considered the greatest painter of his time? It remains to be seen whether the abstract subject has inspired those who have practised it with as many masterpieces as the subjects susceptible of figurative representation. We can only regret that the initiators of abstract art in Ireland, Miss Evie Hone and the late Mainie Jellett, after passing years of austere discipline in the service of abstract art, should both have broken away from the limitations imposed by that art.

Mr. James Johnson SWEENEY (United States) was not quite in agreement with M. COURTHION. He thought there was a danger in considering that the painting of today leads to an academic manner as bad as the "pompiers" tyrannies of the past. This might lead to a misunderstanding and be interpreted as an attack on the abstract art that Mr. SWEENEY admired, and a concession to those who condemn all abstract art because it does not assert the conventional mode of representation which has been current for the past six hundred years. To avoid misunderstanding the speaker said he believed that no style - be it naturalist, expressionist, or abstract - in itself justified a work of art. For the speaker, the work of art cannot exist without a subject. The degree of legibility of a subject can vary greatly. It is certain that even Mondrian and Kandinsky never did without a subject. Painting and sculpture have at all times had two messages to convey: the subject-matter and the theme. One was the prose of its expression, the other its lyricism. But it is never the subject-matter that makes the quality of a poem or a painting.

With the multiplication of means of reproduction, cheap printing and photography which handled the prose element more economically the artist saw his opportunity to stress the intensifying element of his expression - the theme. Subject-matter was not, and could not be, eliminated, but it was subordinated to the other element. It was as if the artists had followed the poets in turning from the narrative lyricism of a Wordsworth to the condensed expression of a Mallarmé.

M. S. KEMAL-YETKIN (Turkey) observed that the artistic atmosphere has now, after lively discussions, calmed down, and the representatives of the two divergent points of view - art in the service of society, and art for art's sake, or "engaged" art and abstract art - seem to be following their separate temperaments. Henceforth we are in agreement that what the artist needs to translate through plastic forms is not an objective theme, but the subjective reality of his own vision. A work of art is the more valid in proportion as it intimately reflects the artist's vision. Non-figurative art leads the public away from the lure of the subject and brings it into direct contact

with plastic form itself, and so prepares it for a more disinterested understanding. Those who cannot enter into the drama of lines and colours, in voluntarily seek in works of art, man a prey to the horrors of an inhuman world. The subject-matter that springs from the taste of the time loses its value, and dates, whereas the subjective reality always remains young. In Turkey, young painters who used to be dominated by social preoccupations, seem to be now more concerned about art itself. The last generation, some of whom practised abstract painting while others followed the example of a Bonnard or a Dufy, has now turned for inspiration to their long pictorial tradition, returning to local themes more fitting to their temperament. We might draw the following conclusion : the subject should find its artist, rather than he look for it.

The PRESIDENT congratulated the speakers and after having thanked those present, declared the working sessions of the Congress closed.
