

SPEECH GIVEN BY DR. LUIS HERRERA CAMPINS, PRESIDENT OF VENEZUELA,
DURING THE OPENING SESSION

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The XXXVI General Assembly and the XVII Extraordinary Congress of the International Association of Art Critics have chosen Caracas as the site of their meeting, in a kindly gesture which we perceive as an acknowledgment of the universal importance of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, in view of the fact that we are celebrating the bicentennial of his birth during 1983.

The presence here today of enlightened experts, members of a renowned organization which had only met in Latin America once before -in Mexico twenty years ago- provides an even deeper meaning to this historical celebration. Bolívar's image, in which action and thought are compounded, symbolize, the world over, the struggle for liberty, which is the path taken by the history of mankind.

Liberty and critique are mutually demanding and necessary concepts. The practice of liberty permits, tolerates, and even presupposes criticism, while the practice of criticism demands liberty. They are indivisible concepts, integrated within the same reality. This explains why intellectuals, artists, scholars, researchers and, in general, creators, are who most urgently demand liberty, not only due to their personal traits, but also because of the works they wish to produce.

Critics observe, appreciate, approve or deny; that is, they judge. These judgements must be based on solid principles. This process implies being able to look beyond what the eye of an ordinary observer or an unaware spectator might see.

When examining a given work of art, the critic begins to establish a series of considerations which make up the guidelines of his judgement. In fact, the critic regards it part by part, and therefore with relation to the whole. It is seen as a product and is consequently related to the person who produced it, trying to establish similarities, approximations or contradictions with other works of art. The critic examines its literary or artistic potential which means that he/she dares to submit a judgement regarding its future importance. He also places it within the historical, cultural, and social context in which the author moves, and, in any case, whether the critic admits it or not, carries out a comparative exercise, even if disguised within the trappings of a value judgement. All this implies that the critic must have not only cunning, instinct, sensibility, and fine-tuned perception, but also knowledge; I might even say, erudition. In other words, according to a Venezuelan writer who worked as a critic during many years, "a critic cannot be an ignorant but talented person".

Elmar Rojas Azurdía, during a recent European forum, stated the following when referring to the problem of "Art and Society": "the dehumanization of mankind undoubtedly dominates our world today", adding "the artist is a human being, and as such, cannot help but participate in the problems facing the period in which he lives. The artist cannot become a mechanized idol which functions thanks to the control by a systematic machine. He is not a mere piece of this enormous machinery our

society has become.... As a member of society, he/she must belong to it, but not as a number or abstraction, used only to complete the great mechanized clock of the world."

In an essay on "Latin America: A new humanism", Leopoldo Zea, the Mexican writer, starts out with the "Bolivarian" concept ("We must be aware of the fact that our population is not European, or North American, but that it is composed of a mixture of Africa and America, rather than a European product; even Europe is no longer European due to its African blood, its institutions and its character. It is impossible to indisputably determine the human family to which we belong"), in order to arrive at a "definition of the identity of the creature emerging from the historic experiences of this America. And from said definition, to assimilate and consider one's own, other multiple expressions of what is human and does not have any reason to reject one another. To assimilate and not submerge one culture over another, as had been the case in the history of America. This juxtaposition has been the consequence of the dependant relationship in which this history has developed. We must no longer look for one culture overlapping another one, as was the case of the Spanish conquistador over the indians and that of the neocolonizer over all the rest, but rather a culture in which all these presences can be assimilated without overlapping and which becomes the point of departure, the experience on which the permanent re-creation of our American population can be based... When this situation is perceived, the relation of serfdom which was imposed on it springs up once again and a relation may be attained which is not vertical and dependant, but rather horizontal and equal".

Our country, Venezuela, feels young while trying simultaneously to attain and defend its national and continental identity, within the framework of human solidarity, in spite of being submitted to a permanent process of racial and cultural mix. On guard against the transculturization which the powerful nations wish to bestow upon us, we prefer to walk down the path of a convenient, possible and desired assimilation.

Pedro Emilio Coll, our enlightened essay writer, stated many years ago that "Today there is a noble impatience to hasten the coming of what some call "Criollismo" and others "Americanism"; that is, the aesthetic shaping of the American soul and its objectivation through art. This is a commendable ideal, one which most of us, sons of the New World, desire and towards which we have lead, either deliberately or unaware, during the last few years.... It is believed that foreign influences are an obstacle to Americanism; I do not agree with this, and would go so far as to say that the contrary is true. We must be fair in recognizing that we owe to foreign literature, specially French literature, our capacity to tune in to the necessary means of interpreting beauty; to it we are also indebted for methods used for observing and the taste required in order to put our impressions in order, in accordance to a certain aesthetic perspective... Our eyes have learned to see better, our intellect to perceive brief sensations. Foreign literature is similar to an ideal trip, one which teaches us to distinguish what is characteristic in the things which surround us and amongst which we have grown up. If they do separate us somewhat from

our heritage, this is necessary in order to better appreciate its hues, shades and characteristical traits, such as we do when standing before a painting, which must be seen from a distance and not with our eyes directly over the canvas."

These considerations are valid at the present time, when you will be able to appreciate our visual arts and their development, in the II Visual Arts Exhibition, which is shown every two years (and which I opened yesterday in the Modern Arts Museum); likewise, in the National Young Artists Hall; in the Exhibit of 30 works of art of our great painter Armando Reverón, in the La Rinconada Museum; in the Museum devoted to our most re-known artist at the present time, Jesús Rafael Soto, in Ciudad Bolívar; in the paintings of Martín Tovar y Tovar, which you will be able to admire in the Elliptical Room of the Federal Building next Wednesday; in the Exhibit on Venezuelan Architecture and the Exhibitions of Aragua State Artists and the Arturo Michelena Hall in Valencia, among other artistic expression currently being shown in Venezuela.

You must forgive me if I have dared intrude in the field of art critics, one which cannot be guided by nepotism or ideological prejudices, but rather by a sensitive and objective appreciation of the works of art, as well as by the sensations and intellectual and spiritual impressions which they inspire.

I welcome you all to this land which feels highly honored with your presence and which extends a cordial and friendly greeting.