

3rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

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Amsterdam - the Hague . July 2 - 10, 1951

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" THE SOURCES OF ABSTRACT ART AND OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN HOLLAND "

Report of H.L.C. Jaffe :

"De Stijl", that's the essentially Dutch contribution to the development of Modern Art . As soon as the monthly review "De Stijl" started, in 1917, the contributors (van Doesburg, Mondrian, van der Leek, Huszar, Oud, Wels, van't Hoff and Kok) struggled to create a style which - according to the spirit of the present moment - would exclude any hazard, any manifestation of individual feeling . This new styl was to defeat all that was personal and arbitrary, it was to correspond with the objectivity and the exactitude of the machine.

The new style of these painters and architects - issued from the consciousness of the preceding lack of style - had geometry as a basis . Their painting and their architecture are a creation of pure colours and of plans with rectilinear edges. From the connection which exists between these colours and plans, they created the emotion which emanates from their works.

At first they aimed at purifying the Plastic Arts . They wanted to liberate Art from all the excesses of individual feeling, from all virtuosity and vanity . That is the reason why they began purifying the means of expression and they ended at the primary colour and the geometry, as exact and objective means of expression allowing no personal impulse . This search for purification is already a typically Dutch phenomenon as this same purpose has induced the iconoclasts, 400 years ago, to empty the churches of all that, in their eye, could disturb the mind . They thought that all the pictures, paintings and ornamentations were only there to upset and obscure the contemplation of holy things.

In that same way, Mondrian and Doesburg considered the representation of Nature as a kind of lese-majesty . The character of the "Stijl" seems to me essentially calvinistic.

The Masters of the "Stijl" have chosen geometry as the basis of their plastic efforts, not only for aesthetic reasons, but because they understood that geometry represents an universal value and that it comes very near to objectivity, to truth.



This tendency seems to me equally characteristic of Holland . A comparison with the way they look at things is necessary - in spite of the centuries in-between - for there exists a relation with Spinoza's capital work of which the title is : "Ethica Ordine Geometrica Demonstrata". Considering the intentions of the Masters of the Stijl, this same title could be given to their works . They wanted to defeat the instabilities of Nature by unchanging laws of mathematics . The domination exerted by Mathematics - that is to say Abstract on Concrete and Natural - originates in Holland from another cause than the philosophical tradition alone . Our country is certainly the only one in Europe which was not created by Nature but by man . Everywhere in that construction the abstract ways of thinking are discerned whereas naturakky grown forms are not much observed in the Dutch landscape : canals cross at right angles, fields and polders have rectangular edges, dikes and roads generally stiffen in a straight line . Besides the Netherlands are the only country where the horizon is not an imaginary line but a fact . The Dutch landscape is composed of horizontal and vertical accents .

By this I do not mean that the atmosphere has inspired the Masters of the Stijl their creations . What I want to emphasize as a typical feature of Holland is the fact that the same methodical and clean mind is revealed in their works which - for several generations - has given our country its aspect and, as a consequence, made the cleanliness of Holland proverbial .

The moment having arrived, this spirit could make a way for itself . Whilst all the other countries were exalting themselves in the First World War, the Neutral Holland had plenty of time to think and to wonder how she could use all the inventions, the treasures of the human mind, her organising abilities - which were elsewhere used in fighting and destructing - for a constructive task . The exactitude of to-day's experts, the subordination of personal opinion to a great collective plan, had not yet found their expression in the Plastic Arts . In their art, the Masters of the Stijl have represented the idea itself that, in these same years, gave way to the big scheme of the Zuiderzee-xerken.

The purpose of the Stijl was to cleanse the Plastic Arts of caprice and virtuosity . They started with the means of expression in considering the elements of painting themselves . But their aspirations did not stay there .The purification of painting should not fail to bring about that of the other arts, even that of the whole life, liberated of what is arbitrary and hazard . Those are the Stijl ethical intentions . For some of them - particularly for Mondrian - the Stijl effort was an aesthetic utopia ; it was equal to the trial construction of a new world on mostly aesthetic bases .

Its paintings were to open men's eyes and make them sensitive to the new methodic beauty, so as they would eventually transform all their environment in accordance with the laws of this beauty and be purified at their turn by this renewed atmosphere . For others (van Doesburg, Rietveld, van der Leek, van Eesteren) the duty of the Stijl was the attempt to a suprapersonal style - corresponding to our time's spirit - to the objectivity and the exactitude which quotidian life has accustomed us to . This new style would have the power to solve the duties imposed by our time: to give a methodical and neat form to our habitations, our surroundings and all the town . It could create clearness and order in our familiar environment which, otherwise, would be verging on confusion . By the attempts made by the Masters of the Stijl to give a neat and methodical aspect to our life, Holland has contributed to the best part of the development of Modern Art .