

3rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

---

Amsterdam - the Hague. July 2 - 10, 1951

-

V

" VAN GOGH : THE APPRECIATION OF HIS WORK BEFORE 1886. "

Report of Gérard Knuttel :

Vincent Van Gogh in October 1880 takes the decision to devote himself to the arts, goes to Antwerp November 1885, where he stays 4 months and lives in France till his death on 29th July 1890. So from these not fully 10 years as a practising artist, he lived more than 5 in Holland.

Though he came to his zenith in France, the origin and also the first flowering of his art falls in his Dutch period . The evolution goes with incredible swiftness and in his first period already he created masterpieces, curiously combined with technical awkwardness . He knew his aims from the moment he began to draw (van Gogh is a man of 30 years of age then, quite mature and experienced through life, formed by thoughts and very assiduous and good reading). He has been always of a surprising lucidity about his own work and his devotion to his task got so far, that once, going with comrade through the dunes, he walked through the very loose sand in the hot sun, a shadowy and hardened path being aside . As he complained and his friend asked him to come on the hardened path, he answered: "You must sacrifice something for the Arts". To his friend, who himself told me this 50 years later, Vincent appeared as a crazy fool . This illustrates the value of the symbol to van Gogh . This appears to be the real background of his whole creative work, after which he lived in the most strict sense of the word; he sacrificed indeed his whole being and whole life to his task, which was for him an unavoidable vocation.

Van Gogh was an extraordinary intelligent man . He writes in August 1883 : "Concerning the time I have still before me to work, I mean that I may say my body will bear after all still a certain number of years, let us say 6 - 10" . He, then, is only 30 years of age, but before not fully seven years the end comes! And he goes on : "It is not my intention to spare myself, to fly emotions or difficulties, it is relatively indifferent to me if I will live more or less years . But one thing that I know very well is this : in a few years I have to accomplish a certain task. The world does not concern me, only as far as I have - so to say - a certain debt and task because I "vagabonded" 30 years in this world, to leave a souvenir for thankfulness in the shape of drawing or paintings, not made to please to certain schools or groups, but in which speaks a sincere human feeling . Therefore this work is the aim".



He was an autodidact but in his two years in the Hague (1881 - 1883) he was in permanent contact with many of the older and younger artists of the day, who then at the Hague were the real representatives of Dutch painting. Anton Mauve, his cousin, who was in a certain way his master and adviser, was one of the leading older masters of the "Hague School". Vincent indeed learned from him and he was grateful for it, but they broke their relations as a consequence of the temperament of both of them. So to find his own way was the only possibility with his strong inner certainty and self-confidence. But there are many relations in way of painting (modeling, colour, choice of subjects) with contemporaries, like his friend Breitner. The principle of his art was purely naturalistic and in near parallelity to the great literary movement of the moment, the so-called "Movement of 1880". In this movement between 1880 and 1885 naturalism was followed by a strong symbolistic stream. The work of van Gogh is from the beginning to the end a personal mixture of naturalism and symbolism. Also the feeling of extreme confidence in himself as an artist is common to his fellow painters and poets. But any relation with whomsoever of the young poets, authors and critics (who mostly lived in Amsterdam) is out of the question; his literary interest went - just as theirs - specially to the modern French literature (Zola).

As he leaves the Hague for the fatherly vicarage in Brabant, he struggles with all the problems of design, colour, tone, composition, expression. His letters permit to follow the way in which he struggles with them and prove clearly that Vincent has to his impulsive, spontaneous emotional art a background of thorough studies and uncommon knowledge.

This period culminates in some masterpieces as the Potato-eaters, the interiors with weavers, some landscapes, painted not directly after nature but after innumerable studies of human types, movements, lighting-problems and so on. So he writes about the Potato-eaters: "Working on the painting itself, I let work my brains in the sense of thoughts or imagination, what is not the case in the same degree with the studies, at which there is no place for a process of creation, but where we seek the food in reality for the imagination, that it may be right". The artist is not all troubled by the idea that his work, his style has to change and not therefore he leaves his native country. He writes, some months before going away: "I understand from what you tell me about "Impressionism", that it is quite different from what I have been thinking; but for myself, I find, for instance in Jozef Israëls, such a lot, that I don't wish any other thing or anything new. I think I will still change very much in my way of painting and in colouring, that I will sooner get a little bit darker than clearer."

From the beginning the aims of van Gogh are opposite to those of the French Impressionists: to express the idea visualised by the utter appearance of the material world: not the translation of impressions but the expression of ideas, which come to him from the "motive" - that reveals to him its sense. His art is in principle ideoplastic and not, as Cézanne, physioplastic. But like Cézanne he aims from the beginning at "deformations", to intensify the expressive power - as Cézanne intensifies the impressional emotion. He writes summer 1885 (in Holland): "I would be desparat if my drawings were good. I will not have them academically correct; I will say, that, if you photographed a digger, he certainly should not dig."or" I think the figures of Michelangelo magnificent, though the legs are certainly too long,



like the chests and the thighs are too broad...My great desire is to learn to make such errors, such deviations, changes of reality, that it could get -lies, if you like, but - truer than literary truth."

This way of deformation characterizes the one artist as a "Nordic", the other as a latin, a "southern" man; the one gets the father of Expressionism, the other of Cubism. And Expressionism is characteristically Nordic, germanic, Cubism French, latin.

Certainly the fine characterization of French art that Jamot gave does not fit on Vincent van Gogh; when he speaks of "the great spirits of our country, having always aimed at and realised, that wise and magnificent equilibrium of reason and feeling, that were the ideas of the Classics and the most constant preoccupation of the painters as well of the writers born on the earth of the four rivers the Seine, the Loire, the Garonne and the Rhône". I cannot say I find much of this as the special ideal of our painter, born on the earth of that other great river, the Rhine, at least no more than is the eternal preoccupation of every artist.

Van Gogh's art never changes its contents: Still at the Hague he writes about the drawings "Sorrow" and "The Roots": I tried to put the same felling in the landscape and in this nude figure, so to say to take root in the ground in a spasmodical and passionate way and at the same time to be half disrooted through the tempests. I would express, in this white and slender female body as well as in these dark grumbling roots with their knots, something of the struggle for life... In principle he never changes - and that he knew beforehand! He writes February 1885: "I will not return from what I have been thinking from the beginning and that is why I say, from my side: if I am not good this moment, I wouldn't be better later on, but if I'll be good afterwards, I am good at this moment too. For corn in corn, though to the townsman it seems in the beginning to be grass. At any rate, if they appreciate or not what I do or how I do it, I know no other way but to struggle with nature until she says her secret". So he appears thoroughly sure and convinced of his way, as a logical consequence of the imperturbable trust in his Vocation.

The direction of his ideas with their transcendent, symbolical, spiritual character correspond much more with the nordic than with the latin. More "expressive" than "aesthetic" in his beginning this man thought, with the same strength of conviction, his vocation to be missionary work! To follow his vocation is the first of all things - how, in which way, appears rather secondary. The expressive more than the aesthetic aims being the real roots of all he did, we cannot see this man as a French artist; he appears to be always faithful to his Dutch origin.

So in his Arles period he wrote: "I Think that what I learned at Paris fades away and that I return to the ideas that came to me working in the country before I knew the Impressionists".