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Thème 2

THE THEME AND SUBJECT MATTER IN THE PLASTIC ART OF OUR TIME

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Firstly, what is the subject and what is the theme ? What do these words mean to us in the language of the plastic arts.

The subject is an intermediary - a figure of representation. In relation to the composition as such it is an adjunct which, according to individual approach can be of greater or lesser importance. The theme itself is the proposition which the artist undertakes to elaborate, the figure by which the artist puts forward his underlying idea. Externally it does not illustrate. It is the essence of pure artistic expression.

These two means of externalising the creation of art, the subject and the theme (1) have been able, nevertheless, to coexist in the works of the past, even if one could not separate the two styles. In the best works indeed they seemed quite indivisibly united. Nicolas Poussin "L'Enlèvement des Sabines", for instance, is at once a graphic outline of the "Rape of the Sabines" and a counterpoint of rhythms on the theme of the pursuit.

Weary of reproductions (in an age where reproduction has been multiplied by various means) the artist now prefers to ignore the subject and concentrate on the theme, (an excellent example of "picture-theme" is given to us by Klee in his study entitled "To right, To left").

However in both cases, that of the artist of yesterday (elaboration of subject-matter) and of today (development of the underlying idea) we find the same processes of creation, inherent in the plastic arts. Poussin and Klee, each is guided by instinct, that is to say they create not with the materials of the builder but of the thinker. And what is this thought. It is fantasy; imagination; above all it is more than sheer deduction or acquired knowledge. It is certain that the most gifted man, be he painter sculptor or even an architect can never hope to make a work of art by a flash of the mind or intelligence whatever be his medium of expression, be it imitative or not.

How absurd, then, those who subjugate their natural talent to a doctrinaire system with rules and regulations or who in any way refuse to allow art to flourish naturally with the result that they

end in some mathematical cul-de-sac. Indeed in the works of some purists, the theme of a picture becomes completely outlawed in the process of organisation until it reaches a point of absolute depersonalisation.

There is here, it seems to us, a fundamental error, a new academicism (of abstractions) which must be denounced. This is similar to that other academicism, the destruction of the subject by the overdevelopment of the exterior image. This latter development has replaced "The Pompiers". Now whatever about the subject, the theme is absolutely necessary in the plastic arts. The theme, corollary of composition, seems to orientate the inner thought of the artist. There is no real significance without it. Now if art develops in a way quite apart from logic, that is not to say that it develops without intuition, without a sort of constructive vision which has its own characteristics. Composition is always necessary to bring order to the subordinate parts and to make for perfect unity. The Theme then allows the composition to be particularised, to become clearly expressive and to be communicable.

Let me conclude by pointing out that the absence of the subject in all the best works of plastic art, today, proves as a matter of course that the subject is not necessary. One cannot say the same for the theme, it is an inherent factor in the creation of a work of art without which one could hardly expect to find development, enunciation or cohesion in the expression of the artistic impulse.

(1) Here I refer to their function, because both the The Subject and The Theme increase in value (artistic) in proportion to the talent of the artist in question.