

4th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

Dublin, 20th - 26th July 1953

Theme 1

THE RELATIONS OF A WORK OF ART TO THE ARTISTIC CULTURE OF THE TIME

Rapporteur : Herbert Read

This theme brings to our consideration one of the profoundest and yet least understood problems of the history of art - the problem of the Zeitgeist. The Germans have perhaps been most conscious of the problem, for it is they who invented this convenient word to describe it.

What we have to recognize is the existence, in every age, of a state of intellectual consciousness which is in fact an illusion. For reasons which so far remain obscure certain works of art are elevated temporarily to the highest rank of esteem and popularity, and the best minds of the period may be deceived by them. The duration of the fame of such works varies, but it rarely exceeds fifty years, and may be much less.

All the arts exhibit such phenomena, but they can be observed with most clarity in literature. A typical example is provided by James Macpherson, whose Ossianic poems aroused world-wide enthusiasm between 1760 and 1800. Homer and Milton were evoked for comparison, and the best minds of the time (Goethe's, for example) were deceived. But every art will provide similar examples, and not least the art of painting.

It is not a question of the general level of taste. Another writer who aroused the same universal enthusiasm as Macpherson at the same time, Laurence Sterne, has stood the test of time - he has become "a classic author". Obviously Sterne did not survive because, in the words of Professor Venturi, he was "détaché de son époque". He survived because he gave expression to a new sensibility, a new development of consciousness, and invented an appropriate technique for this expression.

Ossian and Sterne may be compared with Bouguereau and Cézanne, but there is this difference : Sterne was immediately recognized, but Cézanne was not adequately recognized till after his death. But this may be a difference in the speed of diffusion in the respective arts of painting and literature.

.../...

Questions to discuss : (1) Is it possible to define the Zeitgeist while it is still prevalent ? Or is it only definable when it is dead ?

(2) Alternatively : Is it possible to define the Zeitgeist of our own epoch ? What are its possible features ?

(3) Is the Zeitgeist a popular phenomenon, or is it rather the creation of an intellectual elite ? Or is it rather an expression of the "collective unconscious" ? Compare temporary enthusiasms in politics, or in fashions (clothing, decor, etc ...). "Fashion" as a possible explanation of the whole phenomenon, but what then is fashion ?

(4) Must we recognize a "fashionable" element at the highest intellectual level ? In metaphysics, philosophy, history - even in science ? (Cf. the present fashion for synoptic history - Toynbee, etc ...)

Tentative hypothesis : That the "eternal" works of art - those exempt from the mortality of taste and fashion - are those which are based on individual sensibility, to the exclusion of all conceptual or "ideological" motives. But this still leaves the individual at the mercy of unconscious motives - unless genius is precisely the capacity to control the sources of inspiration.