

Sweeney

Theme 2

The Theme and Subject Matter in the Plastic Art of our Times

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen,

After the brilliant introduction of today's topic by Mr. Courthion in his multigraphed and his clear definitions of theme and subject matter I prefer to regard my intervention in the discussion merely in the character of a gloss on certain of the points he has so ably put forward - with a suggestion. For I am deeply in accord with Mr. Courthion's outlook with the exception of one point: I do not believe that a work of art - even the most inferior can ever reach as Mr. Courthion states (in his Roneopyped summary) "a point of absolute depersonalization". On the other hand I agree with Mr. Courthion that a polemic emphasis on the approach to pictorial expression which at one period was necessary to medicine a certain exaggeration of anecdotal or descriptive representationalism in painting, today tends to create an academic outlook as dangerous to free creative expression as the worst "Pompier" tyrannies of the past.

However there is a danger that this latter statement may be misunderstood as an attack on certain expressions of abstract art which I deeply admire and as a concession to those who would like to condemn all abstract art because it does not assert the conventional mode of representation with which we have become particularly familiar during the last six hundred years. And to avoid misunderstanding, let me state quite simply that I believe no style of painting or sculpture - be it naturalist, expressionist or abstract - in itself justifies a



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work of art. The style is never a quality of a work of art. The work of art is always something other and something more than the container and at the same time more than "the intermediary" as Mr. Courthion has described the subject matter of a work of art. A fusion of subject matter and theme is always (on the basis of Mr. Courthion's definitions) is always essential to a work of art. The proportionate emphasis on either depends on the need the artist feels required for the solution of the pictorial problem of expression by which he finds himself confronted.

I do not, however, go so far as Mr. Courthion in his feeling that a subject in a work of art is not necessary. In fact I do not believe that a work of art can exist without a subject. The degree of legibility of the subject for the observer certainly can vary greatly - from the obvious to the barely decipherable or barely recognizable. Even the artist's consciousness of his employment of subject matter may be reduced under certain conditions to a bare minimum. But in dealing with shapes - visual shapes - our source materials imply an inevitable chain of associations. Sometimes these associations and sources are submerged in our unconscious - sometimes forgotten in our familiarity with the formal derivative from them. But even in a painting by Mondrian or Kandinsky I am convinced that neither could have achieved the vitality of organization he did without a reference conscious or unconscious to a subject - usually rooted in experience within the physical world of nature.

But let me offer a suggestion of what may have led to the apparent subordination of the subject matter in contemporary painting and sculpture to the theme to such a degree that the subject almost seems "



"absent" and "not necessary". Let us take as a premise that painting a and sculpture have always been essentially modes of communication - whether the artist is addressing a broad public, or talking to himself as if he were his own public. In the middle ages, in the Renaissance, the post renaissance and even through the nineteenth century, the artist had two messages to convey through his art; these messages are the topic of our discussion to-day: the subject matter and the theme. Through the subject matter he addressed his naïf observers directly. The subject matter in a manner of speaking was the prose of his expression. The theme was what gave his expression its intensity, its lyricism. (Let me say here that neither of these analogies is water-tight. There can of course be a lyricism and a quality in the message of a work of art, even ~~jux~~ as the theme may take a prosaic character.) But it is never the message, the subject matter which makes the quality of a poem or a painting. To take Mr. Courthions example, it was not the legend or graphic description of the legend that gave quality to Poussin's Rape of the Sabines; it was primarily the counterpoint of rhythmic pictorial forms on of the pursuit which made it. The same would hold for Dante's Inferno; not the anecdotal, the philosophical or mystical content, but the treatment of anecdotal, mystical and content in terms peculiar to the mode of expression Dante adopted: verbal music and poetic imagery - organized into a speaking and effective unity.

And when at the end of the nineteenth century the multiplication of means of reproduction and popular communication through cheap printing and photography made it evident that the prose of pictorial expression could be more economically handled by these means,



the artist saw his opportunity to stress the intensifying statement of his expression - the theme and the means to its expression. Subject matter was not eliminated; in my opinion it could not be. It was subordinated, the prose element of pictorial expression reduced for the purpose of achieving a greater intensity of expression. It was as if the artists had followed the poets in turning from the narrative lyricism of a Wordsworth to the condensed expression of a Mallarmé, or in still simpler terms, as if they had given over expression by means of similes in favor of expression through metaphors.

Again ~~my~~ I insist that beneath and within these metaphors is a base source of naturalistic forms or visually sublimated or distorted as they may be. And condensed or telegraphic as the style may be there is a fundamental organization which if I understand Mr. Courthion's definition is the theme tied to the subject. And the only essential difference between good art of today and good art of yesterday in my view is the subordination in our time of the prose element of painting and sculpture to the intensifying element - justified by an increase in our period of the visual means for the diffusion of information - in short the justified subordination today of the subject matter to the theme. But this in itself, we must always keep in mind, does not make the quality of the work. In judging that, we must always hold ourselves above the considerations of the so-called figurative or non-figurative styles.

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