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Thème 1

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

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It appears evident as M. Venturi suggests that each great artist creates his own civilisation. However, it is important to consider if it may not perhaps be the language of his civilisation rather than the civilisation itself that the artists creates. Art is not after all an isolated, purely personal and autonomous activity. Nor is it a gratuitous offering to society nor a useless adjunct because it performs a fundamental function. There is no such thing as the remote world in which art is isolated for art subsists only by communication. Like all speech between men art is a bond of communion.

The problem of the relation between the form (exterior) and the meaning (inner) can then be enlarged and replaced by a system of study on the general function of sign in society. If it be admitted that art like the other languages is assimilated into the life of man as a means of communicating experience one is faced with a new problem apart from the relations between art and other means of expression. The world created by the artist always remains the reflection of his period and of the values we call eternal sometimes of the past, sometimes of the future. A language, plastic or otherwise which would be completely new made without reference to the forms of the past would be quite unintelligible and thereby ineffective. There would be no art production today, that is to say, comparable with the great works of former times. On the other hand the validity of a work of art can only be estimated by its capacity to be understood and by the effect it makes on the people of the present and of the future.

A work of art then becomes part of the pattern of technique and part of the pattern of human society. It shares in activity and in memory. The fundamental point is to discover if man in the past has not approached near to certain ideal prototypes which reflect the immutable world outside himself, or if, on the other hand he is not the creator of his own universe, each moment and each work conveying exactly all his living experience and recorded therein for posterity. Phidias and Raphael are comprehensible to us today because they have given concrete form to sensations which conform to the knowledge of technique and to the theoretic speculations of their time, and because the sum of this intellectual experience and technique falls into the pattern of history and becomes the mode of thought and action, not only of artists, but of all men. What the artist creates is a means of expression not an absolutism apart from man. It is a style more or less lasting and incapable of being effaced from his experience.