

THEME 3

QUALITY AND STYLE IN THE PLASTIC ARTS

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In view of the exceptional amplitude of this problem, I shall limit myself to a few observations which will perhaps provide food for the discussion of this subject.

1.) The end of the traditional notion of Style.

The term style establishes an exclusive order. By constituting a homogenous ensemble of expression ("the unity of style" from which the Encyclopedia of 1775 claimed descent), it excludes the vast diversity of modes of expression which cannot be classed among the strict rules whose sum-total establishes the phisionomy of a style. Now the latter becomes a synonym of "Value" and "quality", i.e. it is not only the common denominator of a number of artistic creations, but it also takes on the role of a scale of values. As from the 17th century, when the term style was introduced into the vocabulary of aestheticians, it was opposed to "confused ideas" to "ridiculous equivocations" and to "coarse nature", and was itself based on "a straitly defined reasoning, that is to say geometrical, and consequently demonstrative". (Abraham Bosse) The evolution of these theories up to the beginning of the 20th century is well-known. (The first break with the unchallenged reign of reason took place at the romantic revolution). The leit-motiv of "style" was first effaced by the dynamic conception of "Kunstwollen" (Alois Riegl) saving the honour of the so-called decadent periods (late Roman art, and Baroque still despised by Burckhardt), then by Max Dvorak (who was the first to recognise the value of the mannerists of the 16th century). And then the moment came when subjective expressionism in art began to be appreciated, i.e. the term "style" began to get back its primitive meaning : "manner of expression". To put it in another way, Giordano Bruno's idea that there are as many rules as there are real artists was rediscovered by the revolutionary artists, e.g. Kandinsky, (*Über die Formfrage*, *Der Blaue Reiter*, 1912).

2.) The "mixture of styles" in the 20th century.

The artistic visage of our epoch offers a vast tableau of "manners of expression" and the term style is reduced to its individual significance : one can say for example, "Matisse's first style" and so on.

Everything seems to be permitted, all forms are accepted : abstract forms as well as "lost Property". If in previous centuries, thanks to a scale of values modes of expression were clearly separated, today "Unity of style" is an empty word : the "Disponibilité" (Benda) of forms and nuances knows no limits, abstraction is mixed up with "trompe-l'œil" (the technique of "collage" in art and literature) and the motto of this complete transmutation of traditional artistic laws might be these words of the poet Paul Eluard : "Everything is comparable to everything, everything finds its echo".

The vulgarised image that has been made out of this universal disturbance, first discovered by Kandinsky (op.cit.) is well known; the "Imaginary Museum" that accepts any and every proof of the creative hand of man : childrens' drawings, pre-historic painting, paintings by amateurs, popular images....

In view of such a heterogeneous collection it is impossible to speak of "style". It is in my opinion the extreme mixture of every manner of expression which is the common denominator of all the "-isms" of contemporary art. Heralded and foreseen by Kandinsky, discovered a little later as "the faculty of freely choosing the degrees of reality" among the Mannerists, by Max Dvorak recently affirmed in the term "Stilmischung"

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in literature by the eminent Romanist E. Auerbach, this hypothesis opens up surprising perspectives, the detailed study of which is too great for the dimensions of this report. (I have analysed them in a study which will shortly be published in the monthly review, "Studium Generale", Heidelberg).

In the two extremes of the present situation we find under the revolutionary appearances the two constant poles of artistic creation : law (e.g. Kandinsky, Mondrian) as opposed to chaos (dada, automatism, etc.). The two following paragraphs deal with law, in which we see the survival of the notion of style.

3.) A new criterion: the "Gestalt".

A world whose aesthetic sensations range from the geometrical line to forms due to the hazards of nature and matter (e.g. the grain of the wood in the engravings of Jean Arp, microscopic forms in the work of Kandinsky, etc..) is in search of a criterion for the "right form" (Bill) indifferently as to whether this form springs from the imagination of man or from the repertory of nature.

I believe that the best means of studying non-figurative expression in contemporary art is offered by the methods of gestaltist psychology. The latter enables us to penetrate more deeply than ever into the "structure of the form", it enables us to distinguish with greater subtlety the degrees of realisation of the form, whether it be dense form or empty form, its balance, its stresses, its structural "disponibilité", etc.. Thus a renewed terminology could be constituted, capable of analysing both "law" and the revolt against law. (The historical data of this method have been analysed in my essay on the relations between Goethe, Klee and Kandinsky, Wiener Kunstwissenschaftl. Blätter, 1953, and in a study on the conception of a work of art in 20th century theory, Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 1954).

4.) A new goal, the Gestaltung.

If the notion of "form" is deepened by that of "structure", the work of art and nature meet on common ground. And from this springs the most revolutionary idea of our epoch; the will to subject the whole of life to the "right form" : "From the smallest object to the whole city". (Max Bill, Form, Bâle 1952). And so "art" loses its isolated position, it becomes identical with "form" : form in its most autonomous existence represents an idea, and so becomes identified with art. This also explains why we always judge a form, be it beautiful or not, by comparison with something else; and why, for form as well as for art, it is, in the last analysis, perfection which is the measure. "Form is thus a synonym for beauty" (Bill). The right co-operation of every component part of a formal entity is - according to Moholy Nagy - more important than the question of whether or not they make up a work of art. The final stage of this processus resembles the vision which Camus expresses in "L'homme révolté" : "Beauty will be experienced and no longer imagined". Art, which is still today, according to Mondrian, an "Erzatz" in a life which suffers painfully from a lack of beauty, will gradually disappear as life becomes more and more balanced.

Let us sketch the ultimate consequences of this new life in which everything will have taken form : the objects of daily life as well as nature (for the "stylisation" of the latter see the writings of Mondrian and Bill). As these prophets see it, art will be integrated into life, the latter submitted to "form", and the question of style settled once and for all : "Style will be experienced and no longer imagined".