

Jan Białostocki

Is the art of our time international ?

During its few thousands years of development European art went through various stages of homogeneity and diversification. There were times when art was more or less similar in Spain, Italy and Scandinavia, as for instance Romanesque architecture in the second half of the 12th century, but there were other periods, when religious, social, political and philosophical reasons divided Europe into different camps, and consequently divided its art in a similar way. Although we use a general periodization for all European countries, speaking, as we do, of the medieval, Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque art and so on, we are always aware of the differences which existed between the Renaissance in Italy and in the Low Countries, and even between the same style in various parts of Italy - in Tuscany, Lombardy, Venice, Naples and Rome.

But still, some periods and some styles are called "international" in a higher degree, whereas we do not use this term for the others. But what we call an "international style" may come into being on different ways. We can understand as international a style, which in a certain period of history is a common artistic language of many centres. The most typical example is the so called "international gothic style" about 1400 and in the first quarter of the 15th century. When confronted with a picture dating from that period and being a good example of that style we have often doubts as regards its place of origin. Pictures painted in Bohemia, Burgundy, Northern Italy, even in England and in Paris have so much in common, that we are often unable to decide to which school they should be ascribed. The history of attributions of the Wilton Diptych is a good proof thereof.

But we are confronted in history also with another phenomenon. There appear in certain times international styles, which "unite", so to speak, artists of various nationalities working in one place, and adopting one mode of expression or at least

working according to similar principles. Several artistic courts in the period of Mannerism as Prague, Munich, Fontainebleau, can be quoted as examples of such centers.

On the other hand there are several periods known, which do not present an unified stylistic appearance : 17th century is such a period. Exhibition called "Seicento Europeo", organized in Rome in 1956-57 proved that no stylistic denomination /like "Baroque", "Classicism"/ could be generally accepted by art historians for that century. But at that time some international trends certainly existed, first of all Caravaggism, which - created by a Lombard artist in Rome and in Naples - found enthusiastic representatives in Flanders, in Holland, in France, in several parts of Italy and in Spain /although the Spanish "tenebrismo" could have had a different origin/. So we can certainly speak of the international character of Caravaggism and the experience of the connoisseur, to which we already resorted once, reconfirms that character, as it is often difficult indeed to decide between an Italian, French and Dutch authorship for a Caravaggesque picture.

Now, in these various cases, where we use a concept of international style, various technical reasons appear, which justify the spreading out of a style from one place to the others. In old times there were the journeys of the artists, the relations between kings, merchants and bishops. Then, from 15th century on prints and illustrated books entered the scene. In the 16th century it was chiefly graphic art which contributed to the growing influence of Italian Renaissance. In our time new factors have arisen augmenting and strengthening international artistic relations : first the development of art publications, books and illustrated periodicals, second - the growth of international exchange of exhibitions, actual market-places for modern art, and finally - the facility of travelling of the public, not everywhere the same, to be sure, but anyhow greater than ever before.

If we now look at the present scene with the various categories of artistic internationalism in mind, we find that

certainly there are in our time international art centers /at the same time centers of art-dealing/ as Paris, New York, London, Rome, where artists of various nationalities and of various backgrounds are working side by side and on often similar lines. We find also, that - like Caravaggism - there exist in our century some international currents, producing works of art of very much similar character and different from works produced by the other artists, as for instance : geometrical abstract painting, represented by the Dutch, Russian, French, Polish and so on; as for instance socialist realism, representatives of which, coming often from countries distant from each other, create pictures strikingly similar in intention, style and even in color.

But still, I am not very much convinced, that what we call modern art, or the art of 20th century is more international than, say Gothic style, or Baroque style in general. What unites the majority of artists in our time is rather a certain similar attitude as far as the semantic and moral side of art is concerned than a similar style. When we take a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth and a sculpture by Marini, a picture by Pollock and a picture by Pignon, a tapestry by Lurçat and another by Adam, can we conclude that all these things represent one and the same style ? And still how many countries have an art where realism is predominant; and how much the abstract art of the other centers differs from so conceived a realism ?

I think that two forces oppose in the field of modern art. On one side there is a powerful and excellent system of information, which makes, that everything is known almost everywhere. Works of art published immediately after their creation are becoming in a way public property and create indeed an international language. On the other side there is an equally strong tendency to overcome this common language. There is a tendency to be original, individual and unique, a tendency born in the 19th century but how powerful in our time. Thus individualistic originality opposes this international "koiné" in painting and sculpture. I think therefore that we should oppose to "international" the concept of "individualistic" rather than "national".

In architecture and decorative arts the internationalism, caused by the importance of technical element in these arts, is much stronger. French architects who work in India, Germans building in America and Italians constructing in Paris are examples of this specific international mixture typical for modern architecture, the UNESCO house in Paris being perhaps a programmatical instance.

I have expressed some doubts whether modern art is indeed so international as we often think. I would like to close this paper saying that I do believe in the international roots of 20th century art. The magnificent cross-fertilization of Spanish and French elements on one side and of Russian and German on the other, made possible the creation about 1910 of what has been the first act of new art. And in that sense certainly the art of our time can be called international.