

WAYS OF 20TH CENTURY ART

by professor V. M. Polevoy

Many traffic accidents - bad and fleeting, real and spurious- happen to those who travel on the roads and cross-roads of 20th century art. I would like to draw your attention to two developments.

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Let me tell you about one of such traffic accidents. The 20th century has witnessed a mostly disagreeable scandal occur: art has fallen out with beauty! Of course, nothing absolute ever happens in art, for some of creative domains continue to stay in touch with the aesthetically beautiful. But be what may, two trends have gone each its own way in the 20th century - what a disaster! Feelings of sensual happiness, the beauty of shapes, textures and colors, the abundance of spatial dynamics and exciting compositions combined to appear concentrated mostly in environmental objects, material things and commercial products. Inasmuch as art ceased to dwell upon beauty, it began to inquire into major problems of human existence and realized how painful those problems were. Compare an art show and a shop window - the former will break your heart while the latter will console and comfort you. The conflict between 20th century art and beauty has been diagnosed repeatedly. The point is that art is quick to recognize the value a non-artistic phenomenon has but art is adamant in refusing to recognize beauty. The artist produces counteraesthetic ideas while the viewer produces antibodies that render it impossible for him or her to recognize the existence of a work of art.

This is the way it really is, but are we right to contend that such a conflict is a distinguishing feature of 20th century art exclusively? Does the experience gained over the 20th century run counter to the totality of the experience gained throughout the preceeding history of art? Over past ages art is known to have accommodated all kinds of secular and religious motifs - disgusting and monstrous representations of atrocities, tortures, cruelty, murders, corpses and scoundrels both unmounted and mounted. All of those motifs are easily and conveniently aestheticized for the art lover to feast his eyes upon. We may assume that antiaesthetic motifs of 20th century art will follow suit and appear aestheticized in a similar fashion.

Therefore, the conflict between art and beauty has two sides to it- on the one hand, a real rift is occurring between the domain of objects and commercial products and one of the intellectual and the artistic, while, on the other, we witness a spurious confrontation between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic in 20th century art with both interchanging just like that.

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The other traffic accident that has happened in the 20th century, or rather a host of accidents, to be more precise, is a clash between forces, trends and movements in the arts. There is no denying that 20th century art has been crammed with endless conflicts to a bursting point. But what is such a clash like? Does it have its own artistic dimension to it?

I have no doubt in my mind that it is the invading forces that are outside the world of art but concerned about it that give rise to clashes in 20th century art (as well as in other historical periods). As we see from the history of the 20th century, art may be rendered embittered from the outside, strife may be kindled and the "peculiarities" of individual art forms may be heated up. One is likely to worship one's own idols while one brands the symbols of somebody else's culture as demons. But this kind of war is not waged by artistic means. Art does not have its own weapon to use in such a war. Art does not have its own means and techniques to put down or cancel some other art form. Each art adduces its own arguments without busting another art form. Every art has unlimited opportunities to assert itself in the times and spaces of artistic cultures. There is room for everyone here and everyone is welcome! It is to be assumed that progressing art and culture make themselves richer in content and one art form is unlikely to develop at the expense of another. In this sense what we call "a clash in the world of art" gives rise to a dissolving context in the world's art.

Those, I presume, are the problems inherent in art - lack of understanding and interest among art forms and estrangement of one form from another. Those problems are to be solved through better education, enlightenment, greater tolerance and flourishing culture but mostly through interaction between cultures. Here we may spot some real problems relating to linkages between cultures and isolate them from "clashes in the world of art", for those clashes are contrived and not organic to the domain of art.