

END OF THE CENTURY. SUMMING UP EVOLUTION IN ART

Those who are privy to fine arts are aware of the tremendous efforts exerted to renovate things in the 20th century when the new type, or a new way, of thinking has emerged to take shape in the arts and when the long-standing balance between the object and the subject and between an object to be represented and an artist's objectified self-expression has been upset. According to J. Ortega y Gasset, famous for his brilliant theoretical modernist model, "Here instead of being an instrument enabling us to think in terms of objects the idea itself turns into an object and goal of our thinking".¹⁾ ("En vez de ser la idea instrumento con que pensamos un objeto, la hacemos a ella objeto y término de nuestro pensamiento")

The 20th century has discarded, once and for all, our illusion to the effect that painting must be, or at least should tend to be, some sort of a body double of our objective world. On the contrary, the aesthetic essence of plastic arts manifests itself only through a dialogue between the artist and the reality and only in the artist's desire to create a new material reality based on the reality that surrounds him rather than in his futile attempts to "recreate" the latter reality.

In recalling Hegel's scheme that shows how art forms replaced one another historically we may say, though stretching a point a little, that in contrast to the 19th century known

1. Ortega y Gasset J. Obras Completas. T. III (1917 - 1928). 3d edition. Madrid, 1955. p. 363.

for its extreme material devaluation affecting art structures and for its bad effects on spatial arts that seek to reveal their inner nature in their own special ways the 20th century has proved to become an age of triumphant plastic expression and a time for us to realize how great its outward form is, though its spirituality, rich as it is, is yet to be clarified and isolated. It appears to come as no surprise that in the 20th century fine arts have again emerged as the linchpin of art movements and undergone a professional revolution that called into question what we had accepted as unshakeable stereotypes in our thinking.

It may be argued that the 20th century has modified the relative equilibrium that established itself between the physical and the intellectual at this new spiral of historical evolution, an equilibrium that was typical of the classical stage of evolving arts. But, at the same time, it distanced itself conspicuously from classical styles. Different theoreticians adduce differing interpretations for the motivations and results of today's creative work, seeing its major pathos now in an intensive search for universal spirituality, now in the autorevelation of the latter's creative potentiality and in the thirst for fresh plastic structures and now in the ideological aspects of the creative process.

Be as it may, 20th century creative pursuits, or, to be more precise, those "formed" in the 20th century, were aesthetic ones in the full sense, both in the sense of their intellectual values and in the sense of objective construction. It was the comprehensive aesthetic activity and special plastic in-

tensity that were the trade marks stamped on the works produced by the newly emerging movements of the Cubists, Expressionists and Futurists as well as by Russian avant-gardists in the 1910s to 1920s. The same is true of the Bauhaus and De Stijl artists, of Picasso's work, of El Lissitzky's typographics, of Henry Moore's sculptures and of the Tuschists' canvasses...

Today it is to be regretted that we have to refer to those movements as bygone ones. Emerging on the art scene at the turn of the 20th century and displaying their dazzling potential about the 1950s, 20th century-shaped art is on the decline now, going through its manierist stage of Postmodernism in the last thirty years of this century. The fact that Action Art is bent on taking over from plastic form-making is a loss that is ~~not~~ on a par with the gain made, a loss that is emphasized by analytic aesthetics which is averse to hammering away at Postmodernism. H. Osborne points out that "... to accept as a new art form something which does not involve aesthetic experience would be to use the term 'art' in a novel and uncomfortable sense".¹⁾ It follows that it is the aesthetic experience and the quintessence of 20th century creative activity that are now gone in art, or at least, have ceased to be its conscious goal. Well, is it not a symptom indicating the end of the formation?

¹. Osborne H. Aesthetic Implications of Conceptual Art, Happenings, etc.// The British Journal of Aesthetics, 1980, vol. 20, No 1, p. 19.

In taking a retrospective look at 20th century art and evaluating it from the historical angle we should give credit where credit is due: it has contributed to introducing the thinking of a new type in art and to establishing a new interaction between the artist and the world that surrounds him. It has also regaled man with the greatest work of plastic art produced in compliance with the laws of plasticity. At the same time, unlike in any other age, 20th century art has found itself a target for never-ending criticisms levelled by its contemporaries. Many of those criticisms are nothing else but figments of conservative thinking and products of psychology of today, etc.; they will be, or have been, gone with the passage of time. But, in some measure, the criticisms levelled at 20th century art are reactions to genuine and still outstanding contradictions inherent in it.

We would like to dwell upon just one of those contradictions we deem most essential. Having manifested itself back in the 19th century and grown highly intensive in the 20th century increasingly individualized social psychology resulted in art losing, in large measure, the intellectual and symbolically meaningful universal importance that was graphically represented in antique and medieval art canons. As man's societal self-awareness disappeared, society also lost its fundamental quality philosophers and aestheticians had long called "commonality", "substantiality", "ontologicality" and "transcendentality".

A rationalistic view of the world that was gaining a foothold, a culture growing secularized and a religion that was losing

its prestige and authority combined to create a unique spiritual and moral void that society expected the artist to fill, for it was the artist who assumed upon himself the mission of teaching how to live and of preaching a new ethic. But 20th century art was unable to measure up to those expectations. And is there not a grain of truth in the reproach Jacques Maritain heaped on the artists of his day: "As a motto art for art's sake simply ignores the world of morals and the values and rights of human life"¹⁾ ("La devise de l'Art pour l'Art méconnaît purement et simplement le monde de la moralité, et les valeurs et les droits de la vie humaine").

Well, 20th century art has not been destined to emerge as the ruler of men's minds everywhere. But I do not think that Ortega is right in saying that it dodged that role consciously while gravitating toward play, irony and farce instead. Picasso's *Guernica*, Zadkine's *Revived Rotterdam* and Moore's *King and Queen* provide evidence to the contrary, as is also the case with the Russian avant-garde known for its keen intellectualism, eagerness for a planetary consciousness and attempts to model a new life. Professor D. Sarabyanov was right in saying that "Even in situations where Russian artists would be engaged in utterly formal experimentation and in a search for ways of expressing man's spiritual formation and outbursts of human emotions, their experimentation would result in meaningful experiences. (...) Russian culture... was excessively obsessed with its search for truth and good and, as a result, it was unable to accept representational discovery as its ultimate objective"²⁾

¹⁾ Maritain J. *La responsabilité de l'artiste*. P., 1961, p. 42.

²⁾ Sarabyanov D. *Russkoye i sovetskoye iskusstvo. 1900-1930*. In the book titled *Moskva-Parizh. 1900-1930. Exhibition catalogue*. Vol. 1, M., 1981. p. 26 (Russian edition).

Mention should be made of the noteworthy moral and axiological aspirations Soviet art pursued in the 1970s. In shying away from official slogans and figurative stereotypes and in combining real life motifs and historical memories the art of the 1970s ponders with emotion over intrinsic human values and puts up overt opposition to ideological postulates prevalent in the age of stagnation. A little nostalgic in appearance, it builds some invented vision of the world and some timeless ontological representation.

It follows that the reason for 20th century art's failure to make its own contribution to rendering social consciousness universal may not be attributable to its unwillingness to do so or to its intentional elitist aspirations, which is what numerous art critics blamed it for. The dramatic evolution of man in the 20th century, antagonistic social trends, exacerbated problems of alienation under totalitarian regimes and other social and historical factors were anything but conducive to the formation of a new substantial consciousness. And art is not to blame for its failure to produce a world-view that would have been recognized by its contemporaries everywhere. After all, in any age history-determined contradictions always leave their imprints on aesthetic activities that, as a result, turn out to be restricted and inadequate in some measure. 20th century fine arts have not proved to be exceptions to that rule. So let us show our gratitude to the artists of this century for the legacy they leave for their posterity to inherit!

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