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Theme 1

The relations of a work of art to the artistic culture of the time.

by Franz Roh

Ladies and gentlemen.

I must begin with an apology: I have, alas, to read my contribution, for the simple reason, that my English is not good enough. I cannot speak freely, as I usually do. And even so, you will have to bear with my appalling accent.

Our theme is: the world of art in the artistic <sup>culture</sup> of the time. The artistic culture has its productive side, the artist and his work, but also its receptive side, the art-public, the collector, the giver of contracts, but above all public <sup>i</sup>opinion, which finds its expression in art-criticism. Sir Herbert Read referred to this whole complex as the "zeitgeist".

Certain sceptics believe to day, that the zeitgeist is nothing but an ex-post-facto-construction of the historians. This is not my opinion. I would say only, that the zeitgeist is something much less homogenous than historians are inclined to think. A number of years ago I began to ask myself, what in fact art-criticism had said in the p a s t about the various works, as and when they appeared. And in my book "on the History of Misunderstanding in Art" I tried to examine this, but I was forced to confine myself to the last 2 centuries, because the information of earlier times is quite insufficient.

In every period art changes and develops. Almost always, there are 3 different kinds of artists present: the definitely conservative, the definitely avant-garde, and those, whose work lies on a middle line. In the same way there are usually 3 kinds of public and 3 kinds of critic to correspond. All three categories are in movement historically, but at very differing speeds. Other divergencies you find in the zeitgeist by the three generations, which you always meet in the same time.

The works most easily understood are those, which are conservative within their time, for their form is already traditional. The works of the middle line are a little more difficult; but most difficult are those of the avant-garde. Because most observers <sup>only</sup> are creatures of habit. They regard every form more or less new as unnatural, or modish, or intellectual, or snobbish. Thus, every new type of art at first produces a negative reaction in the public, a reaction based chiefly on its new forms. Today many believe, that, what the public is looking for, in painting and in sculpture, is simply a reflection of Nature. That is not true. The public wants art, but only such art, as remains within an already existent tradition. In a period like the Middle Ages, when art had for a long time been a little more abstract, people were shocked, when art grew more realistic. For example Giotto seems to have made this impression on his contemporaries. But after all the various kinds of realism between 1300 and 1900 (historically seen, one continuous period) people were accustomed to the idea, that art imitated nature. So in the 20. century the protest has been the other way round, against abstraction: Matisse and Picasso and then non-objective art.

But after the necessary period of assimilation, the public always accepts



the same works of art, as it previously rejected.

We can find here, I think, an historical law: the Law of Discrepancy within the Zeitgeist. Everything depends, on which of the 3 groups the observer belongs to. From the time of its creation every work of art of consequence passes through 3 phases, whether it is a Beethoven-symphony or a painting by Courbet, by Cezanne or Picasso. At first it is regarded by most people as not being art at all. 20 years later it is thought interesting, but too intellectual. Only in the third stage has it a value as an important work.

The public and the critics of the conservative and central group act as a brake in the acceptance of new forms of art. At least in the sphere of art, I myself think, that conservatism is a greater danger than its opposite: the lust after novelty for its own sake. Because: art is something, which changes continually. But I admit, that conservatism too can be helpful occasionally. When art (and one could say the same of politics or economics) passes from a higher to a lower phase, then one must sometimes be conservative. When there are signs of an ascent, on the other hand, it is necessary to be an avantgardist. In any case one must remain empirical.

A special kind of tension arises, when, as is often the case now, the learned people is too much attached to the historic past. I mean here the typical attitude of the 19th century, which we still feel to day, an admiration for everything hallowed by age: people live with antique furnishing, and they find modern pictures or sculptures strange and unattractive, although they run after the newest model car and the latest fashion in clothes. Such a sharp division of taste is no good thing and it rarely occurs in earlier and more healthy cultures.

Probably, earlier, there were fewer discrepancies. People seem to have less shocked by new forms. But that was, because in magical and religious cultures, the form of works of art is not an end in itself, as it has been with us for the last century and a half. In earlier periods any possible aversion from new form was at once absorbed in reverence for the sacred object or the metaphysical purpose. But: our battles of form are a good thing, for they make evident the truth: that in art form-questions are in reality the most profound.

Certain historians of art hold, that these disharmonies between creators and public, within the same period, are not worth discussing, since art has always gone on, developing, victorious over opposition. On the other hand one must not forget, that such disharmonies cause the loss of many fine projects: important architectural plans are not carried out, and their place is filled up by the work of epigones. Meanwhile the hesitant spectator deprives himself of an experience. Moreover, the spiritual brake, which he applies, unfortunately can affect the inner life of the creative man. I will offer 3 examples of this: Emanuel Kant asserted, that, while he had never told an untruth in his writings: because of the public he often not dared to tell the whole truth. Wolfgang Goethe wrote: "If intelligence and culture could be



universal, the poet would be in a happy position. Then he could always tell the truth, and need not fear to give his best". And even the self-willed Ludwig van Beethoven admitted, that he had only occasionally trusted himself, to write down and publish the highest, that he could conceive.

Sometimes the Zeitgeist is so divided, that those, who make the <sup>ge</sup> judgments, consider everything produced by their own time as decadent. About 1200 A.D., just as the Middle-Ages were reaching one of their highest points in art, Walter von der Vogelweide found almost everything negative. Later you know, Savonarola and Michelangelo, both had doubts about their common period, though for very different reasons. Hölderlin too passed a negative judgement of his time, which he found above all chaotic, whereas it is now respected as one of great unity.

That's always this want of perspective, when we stand too near. The latest period seems chaotic, while those, lying at a distance, are unified in a sort of golden haze. But of course such an attitude is not exactly favourable to young talents, of which there are always more present than have an opportunity of developing.

I have no time and no photographs to describe the scandals, which so many great works and masters caused at the moment, when they appeared: The opposition to Mozart, to Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, Debussy, the opposition to Delacroix, J.F. Millet, Corbet, Manet, Cézanne, van Gogh, Picasso, also the opposition you know to Paul Klee and Kandinsky, when they appeared in the "Blaue Reiter" (group at Munich in 1911). The best German newspaper wrote: "These painters are either impudent charlatans or else incurably insane". When we in Munich repeated the same exhibition in 1949, the very same paper applauded and called it great art. The Zeitgeist had caught up with the painters. This is an excellent example of the period of assimilation, which is always needed. In sculpture let us remind only of 2 examples quite opposite to one another. On the one hand Rodin's Burghers of Calais. The Calais Commission made itself ridiculous by rejecting the group, because the sculpture had aimed at a lively realism. On the other, after non-objective sculpture had developed, Max Bill's Monument by the lake of Zürich was destroyed by the local students. We see then, that Realism or Abstraction: people always want the form, to which they have longest been accustomed. This discrepancy works out most unfortunately in architecture. For here the conventional buildings are apt to block the space—perhaps for centuries—which is needed for new and original works. One of the most appalling examples of this was the lost campaign of 1928 on behalf of Corbusier's project for the Palais des Nations on the lake of Geneva. The victory of an majority at the same time has meant, that boring barracks of buildings stand there now, beyond recall.

We shall never entirely overcome the period of inertia on the part of the public. We can however diminish it, if we as critics devote ourselves to awakening understanding for each new idiom. Only when this has been done, is the spectator in the position, to distinguish the differences of quality within the idiom itself. For example, there is any amount of trash within the idiom of non-objective art. In their addresses



Signore Venturi, Monsieur Francastel and Sir Herbert Read have all rightly stressed, that the quality of ~~the~~ spiritual forms is infinitely more important than any question of style. Perhaps gradually we may arrive at a theory of <sup>the</sup> Relativity of Form-Values. I <sup>am</sup> myself attempting to work out such idea. It seems to me, that such a theory will have to take account of the various basic types of human perceptions, and then work out a system of valuations in connection with them, as clearly as possible. Even if it is not possible to establish such a system on a basis of rational proof, perhaps we may still be able to give a certain effective authority. Fortunately even simple assertions are sometimes contagious.

Finally you may ask me: when is it proved, that we have to do with an authentic g e n i u s of art? The men, whom we regard as truly great, are those, whose value goes on, being accepted under the most various <sup>successive</sup> tendencies. Such a master was for instance J. S. Bach. Bach was placed in the first class by: the classicists around 1800, by the romantics as Robert Schumann, then successively by the rationalists, then by the men of sentiment such as Albert Schweitzer, and finally by the Constructivists. Each time it was for a different reason and from a different point of view.



My answer to Mr. Cogniat in the discussion

Mr. Cogniat distinguished romantic -individualistic and classic art. He said, classic art lives from its beginning in harmony with the public. Only the individualistic-romantic art is always seeking for new forms, and therefore meets with the opposition of the public, I spoke of. But I think, the classic styles have also new elements. Therefore you can speak of a dozen ~~of~~ kinds of classic styles. When the public has assimilated classic Nr. 3, it makes opposition, when Nr. 4 is beginning. Three examples: When Willibald Gluck came with his strong and clear music, he found a great opposition. When David and Ingres arrived, they were attacked, because their classicism was of an other kind than the style of Poussin. When Goethe published his "Iphigenia" or Schiller his "Bride of Messina", they were blamed by the adherents of Corneille and Racine, and so on.

Every new type of art can at first produce a negative reaction, till the assimilation period has followed. This diminishes only in periods ~~in periods~~, where magic or ~~religious~~ religion offer a bridge, to help one over the formal innovations. I think, this is for instance the chief difference with regard to the public between Grünewald, Dürer, Holbein on one side and Picasso, Braque, Gris on the other side.

You must not interpret the art of our time so much near an individualistic affront, as it seems to be. You can do it with dadaism and perhaps futurism. In other spheres the modern artist ~~is~~ also lives in harmony with his neighbourhood, when the public has assimilated the new style. - What is <sup>to say</sup> ~~new~~ more difficult in painting and sculpture? 1) the evolution of art has accelerated. 2) the public at once must understand new tensions of color and forms. 3) the public cannot ask for the object. 4) the public does not find religious symbols in the strong sense of an metaphysical institution.