An Approach to Modernity in Art

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To Webster of dictionary-making fame is given the credit for saying that to become famous one need but espouse an extremely unpopular cause and work vigorously to promote it. The title of this paper indicates clearly that my fame is assured. "Modernity," in art, as in other fields of human endeavor, has always been unpopular, statistically at least. Even among those who call themselves artists, only a relatively small number will admit that modern art has any value in any respect. In fact, comparatively few artists go "modern." It is not my purpose to persuade any artist who has found the most personal way of expressing himself, to give up his established practices in order to turn modern. This paper was written in the hope that it might give a little help to the bewildered layman in the field of art. For it is my belief that the reason laymen do not appreciate art more than they do, especially modern art, is that they do not know what to look for in art works.

For the purpose of discussion, we shall make art mean all kinds of artistic expression, including music, painting, sculpture, literature, dramatics, dancing, architecture, interior decoration, and perhaps still other kinds that may come to mind. We shall designate as "modern art" the varied contemporary expressions of serious art only. In our discussion "modern music," for instance, is not to be confused with jazz, or so-called popular music; "modern painting" will not refer exclusively to abstract or non-objective productions; when we say "modern architecture" we do not mean all-glass houses only; and so on throughout the various categories of art. A fine piece of chamber music by Ravel, one of the better known paintings by Picasso, an exquisite terpsichorean production presented by the Ballet Russe, an architectural masterpiece by Wright, a powerful drama by O'Neill—such products we shall refer to as "modern."

We of this generation have heard about Stravinski, Proko-

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fiev, de Falla, Debussy, Ravel, Picasso, Mattise, Grant Wood, Derain, Martha Graham, Diaghilev, Eugene O'Neill, and other moderns, and we can see the sneers on the faces of many of their "critics" when their works of art are mentioned. We have also heard how the masterpiece produced by a four-inch paint brush attached to the tail of an ass received a grand prize when exhibited in a Paris salon. This anecdote is usually told in order to insinuate that that sort of thing is typical of all modern art, and consequently, that all modern art is insincere. I have heard it said by some recognized artists even, that "people who paint like that are nuts—crazy as a bedbug." It is not infrequently suggested by otherwise discriminating people that excessive drinking and addiction to dope are often the motivating causes of modern artistic expression.

In almost any field of human endeavor reasonable people know that they have to have certain requisites to be able to judge the quality of any ideas or products of skill. Isn't it strange that in the field of art, in religion, and in literature numerous uninitiated laymen feel perfectly capable of judging quality without ever having had any technical training, instruction, or experience in these fields? Van Loon, in his excellent book *The Arts,* reminds us that "the layman is rarely asked to favor us with his opinions upon the work of an expert surgeon or engineer." Then he asks, "Why should we not extend the same courtesy toward the artist, who expresses himself in quite as individual a way as the man who removes our appendix or who builds our bridges and subways?"[1]

In view of the nature of his work and contribution to the community, the serious and sincere artist could well be compared to a "recording instrument." The "records" made by any artist are never like those made by any other artist, however, for each artist records in his own particular way. The "record" any artist makes becomes a reflection of his attitude to life as he sees and understands it, his individual philosophy, his personal credo. "Whether his 'record' means something to the rest of us or nothing at all," says Mr. Van Loon further, "is none of his concern. The nightingale and the raven too are not interested in our opinions. They do the best they can in the hope

1 Van Loon, Hendrick Willem, *The Arts* (New York, 1937), p. 16.

that they will gain the approval of some other nightingale or raven. This is very sad when the nightingale finds himself surrounded by ravens or *vice versa.* But nothing can be done about it."[2]

All pre-modern art movements and styles of recognized standing began as "modern" movements and styles. Every new form of artistic expression was the result of a strongly felt dissatisfaction with the more or less established and current art forms. The ancient Greeks did not know that the forms they were using were ancient. They did not even know that they themselves were ancients. In fact, they firmly believed that they were modern—and, what's more, they were. Digging among the ruins left by old civilizations, we have never yet unearthed a coin stamped 215 B.C. Naturally, the people who were living in the era we now designate B.C. did not think of their day in terms of what was to come; they know only what had gone before. In that sense of the word art works produced today are no more modern than those of any period preceding our own.

It is not surprising to find that today modern works of art are roundly denounced as inferior, as insincere, as unreal, and as lacking in art qualities generally. That is precisely the way in which most modern works of art have been received in any period of history. Rembrandt's "Nightwatch," now sometimes singled out as the world's greatest artistic achievement, at the time of its creation was considered extremely modern. The clair-obscure that characterized his paintings, by which he highlighted centers of interest and caused other parts practically to disappear, was entirely new among the artistic practices of his day. The members of the nightwatch who paid to have their picture painted by the great Leyden master felt that the photographic objectivity and fidelity they had hoped would characterize their painting were very uneven, and in spots, entirely lacking. Even though Rembrandt's technique was considered a radical departure from conventional methods when the "Nightwatch" was painted, today the most conservative art teachers recommend to all their students that they make a close study of Rembrandt's work.

The writings by Emile Zolá, like *The Saloon,* for instance,

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2 *Ibid.,* p. 17.

were very modern in their day. It was generally felt that in them artistic form had been reduced to a minimum, while content had been raised to the maximum. For all practical purposes, Zolá's naturalism constituted a complete reversal of the sugar-sweet type of realism current in France before the turn of the century. Naturally, many patrons of literature found that Zolá had gone too far, that his art work (if indeed it could be called art) was too modern.

Again, none of us today would think of Beethoven's later symphonies as modern. But Beethoven's contemporaries found his method of expressing himself artistically entirely new, very erratic, and quite incomprehensible. The execution of Beethoven's compositions also demanded new technical skill and dexterity from the orchestral musicians of that day. In fact, it is said that one string bass player threw down his instrument and gave it as his opinion that Beethoven was completely insane. Today Beethoven's style is generally regarded as sane, even sedate, the very antithesis of modern.

Most of the artistic practices that originated in former periods were short-lived. Relatively few of them become well enough established to be regarded as conventional today. How many of the art forms now called modern will endure to strike root and gain general acceptance, no one can predict with assurance. It is to be expected, however, that most of the modern experiments now being tried will be given up sooner or later. It has always been thus and there is no reason to believe that the history of present modern art movements will not run true to form.

When the layman says that modernity in art is not justified or justifiable, he really means to say that he recognizes a rather pronounced difference between the modern and the more conventional and established pre-modern forms of expression. He notices that in one way or another a modern art work has left the beaten path. Being familiar with the established and accepted forms, and totally unaccustomed to the modern forms, in his perplexity he is immediately tempted to say that he does not understand a modern work of art.

In the case of modern interior decoration we are already adjusting to many new developments, such as new combinations

of color, new linear design, the use of new materials, etc., with greater ease than in other fields of art. The old school recommended complete harmonization; the new school suggests principally contrasts, at times violent contrasts. Off-shade rather than straight colors seem now to be preferred. Since we have not yet had sufficient time to become entirely accustomed to these new treatments, we still say now and then that we do not understand them. Particularly in the field of painting, when a modern work is seen for the first time, we often hear it said that the meaning is not clear. "What does it mean?" "What does it represent?" These are among the most popular questions we hear in such a situation. Then it is that we so often hear the comment, "I don't understand it!" As a matter of fact, there is nothing to understand, at least not in a logical sense of the word. For art addresses itself primarily to the emotions, not to the intellect. A good painting, a fine musical composition, an exciting redecoration of our living room is not expected to bring us knowledge or give us information. Art puts no premium on being understandable in the sense of being logical or even reasonable; it would rather stimulate intuition or awaken the imagination. That is its only mission. Art should be made to provide a feast for the senses but should not, and does not, try to furnish food for thought.

One popular objection to modern music, for instance, is that the harmony is "unnatural." Now, our scientific friends can easily show us that the unpleasurable reaction experienced when modern harmonic progressions are heard really has nothing to do with the naturalness or unnaturalness of the harmony used. It cannot be explained on the basis of closeness to nature, therefore. A much simpler and more tenable explanation is that the listener has not yet become accustomed to hearing the tonal combinations used in modern harmony, which always has a tendency to leave him a bit puzzled. The established and already accepted older types of harmony seem natural because the listener has had a sufficiently long time to become familiar with them. The traditional sub-dominant-dominant-tonic progression, which now seems so threadbare and uninteresting to a cultured ear, is composed of the lower overtones, those that lie nearest the fundamental. Modern harmony, on the other hand, results

largely from combining those overtones that occur much higher in the series. Both types of harmony are equally natural, since the component elements of both are taken from the same series of overtones which nature regularly produces. Hence, we cannot assume that the laws of nature indicate that one type of harmony is to be preferred over the other. In the last analysis, the reason conventional harmony is thought of as pleasant, and modern harmony as unpleasant, is that we have had adequate time to accustom our ears to the now called conventional forms, but not to the modern forms. Nevertheless, given time to hear the newer harmonic combinations over and over again, as we were for the old ones, we shall no doubt learn to appreciate many of the new harmonic effects introduced in modern music, and learn that they too can give us pleasurable reactions.

The physicist would explain that parallel fifths and octaves, seldom used in the musical compositions of our predecessors, but now rather freely employed, are always present among the overtones created when any one bass note moves to any other. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be called unnatural either. It is not to be doubted that in time, not too far distant, we shall learn to listen to these progressions and be aesthetically lifted up. To sum up, then: in musical composition our ears accept as harmonious the cord formations and progressions we are used to hearing, while those chord formations or progressions which are in any way unusual or strange are said to be inharmonious. What our ear interprets as harmonious gives us pleasure; whatever we still think of as inharmonious does not. We could speak similarly of the new and unusual rhythmic patterns that characterize contemporary compositions: the established and much used rhythms give us a feeling of satisfaction, the new ones do not.

Now let us raise the age-old question, whether music is a heteronomous or autonomous art. An explanation of these two terms is in order here. Those who think of music as heteronomous believe that the content of music is essentially non-musical; that is, music communicates a reality that exists independently of its embodiment in music. They say, for instance, that "music expresses the will and passions of human beings, feelings and emotions being its burden in a variety and precision not

possible in words."[3] On the other hand, those who hold music to be an autonomous art believe that it is *sui generis;* i.e., its content or meaning is purely musical. The autonomists believe that the musician concerns himself only with tonal-rhythmic structure as he elaborates purely musical thematic material into compositional patterns.

Obviously persons who adhere to the heteronomous theory, that is, those who think that all music represents something other than music, have much greater difficulty in their attempt to get aesthetic satisfaction through modern music than do those who hold to the autonomous explanation. Renato Almeida, South America's foremost living musicologist, has the following to say about the new tendencies in music:

> Music does not have to tell a story, nor make a design, nor model anything. It may be descriptive or plastic, but it must always be a suggestion and permits an atmosphere or interpretation in which the human soul, freed and exalted, experiences life through intense aesthetic enjoyment. The essence of music is music, hovering above all things, dominating them and elevating itself by the eminence of sound, incomprehensible and mysterious. Wagner is right—when the other arts say *this means,* music says *this is,* for it penetrates reality and through emotion creates a sensible world which is higher and integral. The other arts, Nietzsche insists, are arts of appearance, arts of phenomena, arts of dreams. Music transcends and translates the *noumenon.* Therefore, being the only absolute art, at least for the contemporary spirit, it must be the freest, in order better to realize the desire of our sensibilities. We must not, therefore, disturb music essentially by ascribing to it functions which, if it were to fulfill them, would deform it. The more music frees itself from the other arts, the more it becomes music. Parallelism with reality should result in musical creation which does not copy nature, but, on the contrary, originates in it, as if it were a part of its incommensurable totality.[4]

In this quotation the word *noumenon,* a philosophic expression first used by Kant, indicates here the extra-sensible and imponderable reality, in opposition to *phenomenon.* This would make *noumenon* the universal essence, the ultimate reality, the

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3 David W. Prall, *Aesthetic Judgment,* New York, 1929, p. 216.

4 Renato Almeida, *Historia da Musica Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, 1942), p. 449.

thing itself, *das Ding für sich* as Kant called it, inaccessible to human comprehension. The excerpt quoted above from *The History of Brazilian Music* shows plainly that Renato Almeida, like most contemporary students of aesthetics, sees modern music definitely going more and more in the direction of autonomy rather than heteronomy.

Purely from the aesthetic point of view it may be well to remark here that the beauty we try to see in art lies principally in the form, the shape, the appearance of the work of art. The great German philosopher Kant argued that content and subject matter of an art work have very little to do with its beauty. For instance, to ask what a picture represents, or what a piece of music describes, or what a story is about is really beside the point. Although Croce does not go quite so far in this direction as Kant and his followers, even he says that beauty consists simply in successful expression. This explanation still leaves beauty purely a matter of form. Hence, no logical significance, no practical or ethical consideration, not even sensuous enjoyment adds to, or detracts from, the beauty of an aesthetic object. Santayana likewise finds the formal aspects of beauty of great importance, but thinks that the sensuous pleasure caused by art should also be considered fundamental. The pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey and his followers reduces beauty, the cause of our aesthetic experiences, to skillful adaptation of means and ends. Taken to its logical conclusion this point of view erases entirely the distinction between fine art and applied art, which may be just as well for the layman. Lipps made it clear long ago that we "feel ourselves into" objects that we contemplate aesthetically. As a result we call natural phenomena and man-made art works beautiful if we like the way it feels to identify ourselves imaginatively with them.

In general it may be said, therefore, that art, including modern art, tries to make a sensuous appeal, not a rational appeal. To the creative artist the form he gives his productions is of far greater importance than their content. Hence, it follows that, in our attempts to appreciate art, we should look mainly for the manner, not the matter. We are less concerned with *what* an artist paints, and more concerned with *how* he paints. A book review should be more than a reduced version of the story that

can be told in forty-five minutes. Far more important aesthetically is the philosophic and linguistic treatment the author has given his fundamental ideas. At a recent chamber music concert a friend of mine began to enjoy the extremely modern Fourth String Quartet by Béla Bartók immensely, as soon as I got him to quit guessing what extra-musical human experiences the composer had tried to describe, and to pay attention to the novel manner in which the thematic musical material had been worked into a fascinating compositional pattern.

When we become aware of the great importance of the formal aspect of beauty, and we see that the principal difference between conventional and modern artistic endeavor is explained on the basis of form, we begin to see why it is so difficult for so many persons to appreciate modern art in any of its manifestations. By being more interested in the content itself than in the treatment the subject matter received at the hands of the creative artist, they miss the very message the artist tries to convey. Modern artists today deal with essentially the same material as that used by preceding generations. But their personal reactions to this material have always changed from generation to generation, and from individual to individual. These reactions will continue to be personal and individual. The products of our modern artists can give us significant help in developing aesthetic values, mainly because they constantly see life in a new light, using new forms of expression to communicate to us their new impressions. We must not forget that trying to grasp the meaning of new forms of expression is always difficult for a time. But patience will be rewarded here also. Unfortunately, as soon as we grow accustomed to modern art forms they cease to be modern, for then they will already have become like their predecessors, conventional.