What Is Humanistic About Modern Art?

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Every epoch or culture has had difficulty understanding and evaluating its creative art. Twentieth century art in the Western World has had more than its share of doubters. This fact is explainable in that not since Giotto painted "The Life of Christ" in 1300 were such radical departures ever made with tradition.

Part of our problem stems from the term *art* itself. Few words mean more things to more people than the word *art*. To most it means in a kind of general way pictures, books, poems, music, dancing, and acting; it is for the purpose of teaching, explaining, moralizing, directing; and it is representation, decoration, entertainment, play and busy-work for children, and recreation for adults who have nothing better to do in their leisure time.

Though the activity or travail of painting or writing may require talent and skill, or the product (picture or poem) may exhibit ingenuity or virtuosity, and though the seeing or hearing by an observer or participant may involve edification, enjoyment, or even inspiration, it is still quite possible that nothing genuinely artistic or aesthetic has happened. Not that these things are bad—it is just that they should not be mistaken for *art*.[1]

Then what is art? Art is a peculiar intellecto-emotional experience called an aesthetic experience. And what is an aesthetic experience? It is that sense of spiritual lift that brings integration; a dynamic inner peace, accompanied by relatively little or no reference to things, places, people, or information. This statement means that in the presence of a work of art

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which moves one to some degree of joy, the experience is comparatively immediate and terminal rather than mediate or associational. Through traditional Romanticism and Naturalism, we had erroneously come to believe that humanistic values were embodied only in the acquisition of knowledge that would further our well being. We had lost the capacity to see or appreciate color, form, or symbol for their own sake; that is, the immediate experience of beauty.

This *experience* is the basic criterion of great art, art with a capital A. The artist realizes it in expression; the observer, auditor, or reader relives it as an understanding or sensitive participant.

What evokes this aesthetic emotion? It is imagined form, or order, embodying complete, functional, and organic interrelationships—interrelationships of visible or audible colors, tones, lines, spaces, patterns, motives in space or time. These are manifested universally and particularly in natural phenomena, ideas and ideals, in the mystic, the divine, in movement and energy.

Have you ever felt yourself carried away to something beyond *I, me,* and *mine* while standing before monumental architecture, or listening to a symphony? What did it? It was the *order,* the *form,* the significance of structural organismic relationships of pattern, color, tone, linear theme, meter measure, or proportion, rhythm, and movement.

This is the real humanism of contemporary art. This is why artists have sought to emphasize the formal aspects of expression and creation even to the exclusion of "subject matter" and, to a degree, "content." Subject matter and content carry the associational values; form carries the power to evoke the immediate experience of joy and exaltation.

If one cannot accept the idea that the composition, or form, is effective in moving individuals or groups to a higher morale or esprit de corps, how can we explain the effect the Parthenon or a Bach fugue has had upon millions of people? The principle of the "golden mean" or the "divine proportion" in the Parthenon is the secret of its power. It has been referred to as "frozen music." These perfectly assembled measures are the principles the painter is trying to incorporate. Art is an ex-

pression of man in "*significant patterns* which tend to induce feelings for the *Beautiful,* the *Energetic,* and the *Sublime.*"[2] John Dewey has said about the same thing this way: "It is an attitude of spirit or state of mind that demands for its own satisfaction and fulfilling the shaping of matter into new and more *significant form.*" Both of these definitions clearly state that the basis of art, the thing that distinguishes it, the factor in it that is the real spirit or life, the thing that inspires or evokes the aesthetic response, is form, order, pattern, or design.

"Art does affect the lives of men; it moves to ecstacy thus giving color and movement to what might be an otherwise rather grey and trivial affair."[3]

Color, just as proportion and rhythm, has its effect upon man. Psychologists at Johns Hopkins University reported after two years of research on the effects of color that they were "pleasantly surprised to see such amazing clear results come from this research."

Complete scholastic and attitude reports were kept on all the children during one year in three schools needing new paint. The one school was repainted according to the principles of "color dynamics," the second in the usual light buff wall and white ceilings, and the third went untouched.

The second-year performances of the students were next compared with the first. "A study of the work, play and language performance of kindergarten children shows a 33.9 per cent improvement between the first and second year in the school painted with dynamics; 7.3 per cent in the second painted with conventional color; and only 3 per cent in the unpainted school," the psychologists found.[4]

Ordered color and space relations do the same for workers in factories or offices. The attitudes, the morale, the health, the productive capacity, and harmonious relationships can be improved in the citizens of a community, patients in a hospital, or members of a church or a family by the intelligent use of artists and aesthetic principles.

It relieves social tension and conduces to peace and good will. Various forms of strife and anxiety are abated in times of aesthetic enjoyment, and life is lifted to a higher plane.

In times like these man needs art that is more of a magic

carpet than that which is a mirror. He doesn't need to see reflections of more confusion and conflict. He needs to be lifted above them. This is not necessarily escape which implies running away from reality to the fanciful. Many have held that art comes nearer being ultimate reality than anything we experience otherwise. The creation and appreciation of Art, like Religion, is a means to man's exaltation and at-one-ment.

John Galsworthy says that

> It is Art when, for however brief a moment, interest in myself is replaced by interest in itself. And this Art is the one form of human energy in the whole world which really works for union and destroys the barriers between man and man. It is the real cement of human life; the everlasting refreshment and renewal. What is grievous about our lives is that we are shut up within ourselves. To be stolen away from ourselves by Art is a momentary relaxation, a minute's profound and, as it were, secret enfranchisement.
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> There has crept into our minds once more the feeling that the Universe is all of a piece, Equipoise supreme. We have begun, in fact, to have a glimmering of the artist's creed, that nothing may we despise of neglect—that everything is worth the doing well, the making fair—that our God, Perfection, is implicit everywhere, and the revelation of Him, the business of our Art. Art must indeed be the priest of this new faith in Perfection whose motto is Harmony, Proportion, and Balance.[5]

One of the obstacles in achieving the environment conducive to the above benefits is the attitude of many who claim: I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like. People in positions of leadership have a responsibility, but what of the artist? Is he responsible and what is that responsibility?

Each age tends to declare its artists, poets, and musicians irresponsible. "Picasso is a Charlatan," "Beethoven was a barbarian," "Michelangelo was sacrilegious," "Shakespeare was vulgar," "Blake was insane." Historically, what works by what men are truly humanitarian? Who are the great architects of humanistic morale? Your list is likely to include all of the above but Picasso, but what of the list one hundred years from now? It is evident that in historical perspective artists have been stubbornly conscientious and sincere about their responsibility as they saw it.

An artist's moral responsibility is to express himself artis-

tically in his own unique way, creatively in the language or media suitable to his temperament, talent, or communicative purpose.

He, in the aesthetic realm, is a seer. Through special powers and sensitivities he is capable of seeing beyond the surface of things confused and in conflict. "To send light into the darkness of men's hearts—such is the obligation of the artist," says Shuman.[6]

"Whether anybody hears him or sees his work or not makes no difference to the fact that he has expressed his emotions and has therefore completed the work in virtue of which he is an artist."[7]

In some way or other, or to some extent, every human being is artistic. If he is made in the image of the Creator, he is creative. As such, he is moved to shape his environment into new and more significant form; otherwise his world is without form and void.

The artist's first responsibility is to himself, but because of the humanistic power of art he cannot escape a responsibility to others. He cannot escape the consideration of the communicative aspect as he creates.

Regarding this responsibility Louis Mumford has said,

> There are two processes at work in our civilization; one upbuilding, life-bestowing, the other life-denying, leading to ultimate extermination and annihilation. There is a cult of violence that threatens our rationality, indeed, our very humanity. He believes that the artist's greatest danger is in surrendering to the accidental and the irrational and the denial of the possibility of coherence and intelligibility.[8]

It is a cult of the meaningless, the negative, the humorless. No work of art is created in a vacuum. The artist draws upon his experiences. The impact of the social context and visual world upon the artist may be through the philosophical or psychological temper (ethos) or even through "a pair of old boots" (Van Gogh) or a rubbish heap (Pathos).[9]

If we are spiritually and aesthetically sterile or corrupt, is it the artist's duty to hold up the mirror to us? Yes, if he does so responsibly . . . if he does not "betray his art as well as his humanity." He, too, says Mumford, "has a responsibility to be sane, the duty to be whole and balanced, the obligation to

overcome or transform the demonic and to release the more human and divine elements in his own soul. In short, the artist has the task of nourishing and developing every intuition of love and of finding images through which they become visible. If all he can say in his pictures it, 'This is the end'—let it be the end and let him say no more about it; let him be silent until he has recovered the capacity to conjure up once more a world of fine perceptions and rich feelings, of values that sustain life and colerent forms that reinforce the sense of human mastery."

Few cultural epochs in the history of the Western World have sought conscientiously through form or aesthetic experience to "reinforce the sense of human mastery" in the visual arts.

It was a major concern with the Greeks prior to the Helenistic and Roman period (329 B.C.). To the Greeks the composition of a true work of Art was necessarily "organic." Nicomachean Ethics stated that in a good work of art "it is not possible either to take away anything or to add anything"; it must be of single action, one that is complete, whole in itself, so ordered that it produces its pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature. This is reminiscent of MacLeish's statement, that a poem "must not mean, but be."

To some extent this spirit and vitality existed in Byzantine Mosaics; it is also found in most genuine primitive art and in unsophisticated child art. Some of the Renaissance painters were aware of it, but their pre-occupation with content and visual authenticity (Romanticism and Naturalism) soon overcame their concern for form, and it was never to be resurrected except in a few individual cases until the advent of so-called modern art.

Paul Cezanne, the father of modern art, in his struggle to "realize," was searching for significant form. The major effort in modern art is not unlike that in classicism so far as form is concerned—the difference being that the Greeks sought for it through logic and objectivity. Today's epoch is a long way from ideal. It is ugly, cruel, and materialistic, and it is producing much poor art. Frank Lloyd Wright said recently, "Five per cent of modern Art is junk." Historically, however, if

twenty-five per cent is good Art we can still feel encouraged. There have been worse periods. In general, art of today is a revolt against materialism. It is a search for spiritual, inner, and transcendental meanings. We assume a small percent of it to be great art. Not all who say this way or that way have the answer, but my personal acquaintance with a few persuades me that most are deeply and humbly sincere.

Collectively, contemporary artists feel obligated to open the doors to pure aesthetic experience, the sense of complete integrity with the soul of man at the center. This is the humanistic contribution contemporary art would make. Our age has been defined as sensate—that our quest is for the sensory and sensational and that we are preoccupied with the pathological and negative. Nevertheless, modern artists take issue with almost all the basic characteristics of this materialistic age. The revolt is both fundamental and relatively successful. Modernism is destined to enjoy a fairly long lease on life.

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1 R. C. Callingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1958), p. 275.
2 Raymond Stiles, *The Arts and Man* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940), p. 12.
3 Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1913), p. 75.
4 Arthur H. Rice, *The Nation's Schools,* November, 1953.
5 See *Candelabra* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), pp. 17-37.
6 Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Witetenborn Schultz, 1947), p. 73.
7 Callingwood, *op. cit.,* p. 301.
8 Lewis Mumford, *The New Republic,* March, 1954.
9 T. I. Semall, *A History of Western Art* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953), p. 65.