

Presidential Address (continued)

be and the severe trials we will undergo in the process, that ultimately, as a Black Brother once said, "We Shall Overcome." When the history of the struggle and its successful consumation is finally written, your contribution to its success will be noted."

ART AND REVOLUTION

Sari I. Khoury*

In our world, art has multi-functions, and hence, addresses itself to different types of audiences. This factor imposes the need for definitive objectives in terms of the audience to which it addresses itself. There is no doubt about the fact that art is universal, but it is only so in terms of the idioms it utilizes rather than the terms of its content or degree of comprehensibility. These idioms become intelligible with education and with exposure. Content is not always readily comprehensible, and quite often, it can be misleading and confusing. Frequently, we understand content in the wrong manner. Even critics and art historians do not always agree on content. In the case of Picasso's GUERNICA, neither critics nor audience nor artist agree on one content. Yet, it is acclaimed by all three as one of the great works of art of this century. The work comments on a particular incident, and is without a doubt, an outcry against the cruelty of war and the murder of innocents. However, in that painting, there is no mention of specifics, and its symbols are not in the form of a mathematical equation. Aside from its main descriptive statement, we are confronted by a wealthy multitude of symbolic connotations. In here lies the illusive and poetic quality of art. The expressive style of the artist and his transcendence of the historical aspects of the original setting qualifies this painting to become a work of art rather than a decorative work or a literary work, or a virtuoso in technique

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Art and Revolution (continued)

The idioms of art, whether expressed by one artist, or a movement, or a milieu can always be deciphered as in any language. We now know what cubism is all about, what Dada is all about, and what El Greco and Matisse are all about. In the works of an artist, or a movement or a milieu, there is a pattern of growth that can be traced to its sources and can be justified in its own development. By the process of evolution the works acquire a *raison d'etre*. In responding to such evolution, we become capable of understanding art, and we accept it in its totality. If an artist communicates, it is in such manner rather through individual messages issued forth to us. Therefore, when we look for content, our search should not be limited to the totality of meaning in one work, but should concentrate on the pattern of development of which a work is only a stage and our comprehension of it depends on relating it to such development.

In relation to the communicative levels in art, we are basically concerned with three levels: social art that addresses itself to the masses with a certain level of literacy, decorative art that addresses itself to a tasteful group of people and maintains contemporaneous aspects and problematic art which concerns itself with concepts of presentation and addresses itself to professional groups such as other artists, critics and art historians. These three divisions are not necessarily final categories but quite often overlap one another, however with one overshadowing the other or others. An overlap of the above categories can sometimes lead to one cancelling the other, or can maintain a perfect equilibrium. Many times I have seen paintings of street urchins and beggars depicted in a tasteful manner. In such paintings the subject and the manner of presentation are incompatible. It is my opinion that art should be committed to one of the above three objectives with some elements of the other or others. GUERNICA is predominantly a social work of art, but also concerns itself with decorative color and with problematic space. The latter two contribute successfully to the first, but with some sacrifice of their intrinsic advantages.

At this point, it is important to define briefly the objectives of each of the above categories. In decorative art, the artist concerns himself with pleasant relationships without any attempt for philosophical depth. Here art does not challenge the audience but offers an element of enrichment to certain types of people that demand it. This type of art usually flourishes among affluent societies. Its only qualities lie in sensuous characteristics. Art such as this is obviously not adaptable to a rising social

Art and Revolution (continued)

revolution, and its contribution to a cultural revolution is only minimal.

In problematic art, the artist is generally preoccupied with the aesthetic characteristics, with research in visual phenomena and the manner of representing it or presenting it. In the study of art history, we find most artists were first preoccupied with a manner of presentation and second with the iconography. In fact, iconography becomes inbred with time that it loses the strength of its content. What remains is style, and style like science requires research, trial and error, capitulation and recapitulation before it transits from a self-conscience effort to a more natural effort. Style, too, can become inbred within the work of one artist or within the trend of the period. It is only through the innovative efforts of dedicated artists that style continues its dynamic force in the process of evolution.

Problematic art, many times, is accused of being alienated from its social environment. This might be true, for it does not render a direct service to a society or a faction of society. Rather, it becomes either an introverted, intellectual exercise, or it addresses itself to a group of professionals such as artists, critics, art historians, etc. It would be rather rash to condemn such art as totally useless, for it is this type of art that becomes, in the long run, an integral part of a particular culture. Even though its effects are not directly felt, it is in its contribution to the world of ideas that it becomes serviceable to mankind. It is possible to add also that its immediate effect on a society, among other functions, takes place in the manner it initiates newer ideas, and it influences the trends of taste.

Social art is rather complex, and its objectives are rather hard to define. Social art takes roots usually in a developing ideological setting and works hand in hand with ideology toward a common goal in service of the people. It can be sympathetic to the oppressed, it can expose, it criticizes and condemns tyranny, it can provoke institutions and initiate reform and progress, it can question and defy existing values, and it can document a way of life. The main characteristic is that it directs its attention to the conscience of man.

The fact that social art has many facets complicates its manner of presentation, and many times it falls short of its intentions. If its ultimate objective is to communicate ideas and feelings to the masses, our concern here should be the efficacy of such communications. It would be interesting

Art and Revolution (continued)

here to consider some instances in which art and ideology influence one another.

The Arab artist expressed himself in the most intricate fashion, and used highly abstract geometric decorations to fill the walls of mosques and public buildings. Such expressions were impersonal but very much in the spirit of his religion and his time. The intention of his art was not to fill the art-loving eyes of the elite, but to offer a meditative exercise to all men without any adulteration by image, or undecipherable symbols such as in ancient Egyptian art. Arab script writing and architectural decorations offer a message of humility, and absorb the viewer into continuous interplay of rhythmical activity similar to the waves of the ocean. The viewer and the work become one. Andre Gide in the Immoralist refers to the integration of life and art among the Arabs: "I despise those who cannot recognize beauty until it has been transcribed and interpreted. The Arabs have this admirable quality, that they live their art, sing it, dissipate it from day to day; it is not fixed, not embalmed in any work." The lack of iconography, the lack of individualized works of art, the lack of egotism and identity within the creator elevates art into the highest form of social art where art and life become wedded together.

Medieval art shares with Arab art a lack of egotism. Here, we find swarms of craftsmen, artists, and architects regimented to edify a culture without heroes. The ultimate purpose was the moral education of the masses. The individual with all his talents contributed all his efforts to accomplish the ultimate mission. This approach is altogether in contradiction with the self-inflating ego of Roman and Greek culture.

Among individual artists, we find that Botticelli burned a major number of paintings which to him became contrary to the humane teachings of Savonarola which he had adopted. By the same token, Michelangelo's works became more and more compassionate as he became more and more influenced by the teachings of Savonarola. All these instances imply the fact that in social art, the artist has to nullify his ego and regiment his efforts to work for a common cause. Such assertion may lead one to the conclusion that individuality plays no role in social art. This, however, should not be the case. Individuality will come through the fingertips of the artist no matter what the conditions may be. It might even take a stronger semblance when the artist is committed to a common cause shared by the masses.

Art and Revolution (continued)

One of the dangers of social art is literalism. By this, I mean the substitution of images for words. This can easily lead to a superfluous inclusion of meanings, ambiguity and generalization. It can also be a static description of a moment in time such as in genre art. Literalizing, however, can have strong qualities. It can bridge the gap between the written and spoken word on one hand and the recipient of the words on the other. The visual arts have proved effective as a means of communication where a state of illiteracy prevails, such as we find in the didactic art of the Middle Ages. They are also effective in a society where speedy communication is imperative. It is in these two latter functions that social art becomes extremely effective. In the service of these two functions, easel painting is the least effective means of expression. It is replaced by the graphic arts which have the advantage of reproduction and wide distribution, photography and cinematography which have the same possibilities but with the advantage of documentation, mobile exhibits which avail themselves to the masses, and finally mural painting in public places. However, this latter medium takes a static function when the ideas in it become obsolete. All these media become a strong pillar of communication in a revolutionary society. They can be tragically misused when they become solely elements for self-praise or propaganda.

In assessing the present standing of art in relation to the Palestinian revolution, we can objectively say that it has not reached a level by which it can either service the people or reflect the Palestinian cause to the rest of the world. The talent is there, but it requires capitulation and coordination. Our present need lies first in social art through which the masses can be reminded of a cause. We need instructive media through graphic communication such as posters, films, photographs, slides, etc. The artist has to be utilized as a gear for communication, but the manner of expression should be reserved as his sole right. Instructive communication with the masses should be a chief priority. A secondary consideration should be given to the competitive artist who addresses himself to the art profession around the world. This artist would in a sense reflect his own culture, and what can better propagate the goals of a nation than its own culture? It would be interesting to note that Palestinian artists of such caliber are probably wandering around the face of the earth in their exile. Another consideration would be presenting our case to the world through documentary films and photographic exhibits. Palestinian and Arab students around the universities of the world are craving for that type of documentary presentation.

Art and Revolution (continued)

The Palestinian revolution is now undergoing structuring. The raw materials are there, but structuring should incorporate every type of combat potential. The artistic potential should not be underestimated. The Palestinians' case is clear, and our sentiments are strong. Let us balance our sentiments with a sense of objectivity. Let us not allow our sentiments deteriorate into self-pity, praise, or story-telling. These are the characteristics of the weak. What we should strive for is performance. In our contemporary world, performance has weight. It takes a competitive nature. We have to compete in war, politics, art and science...We have to prove our capabilities through honest thinking, feeling and acting.

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