THE AESTHETIC EDGE

Norman Olson, President 1970-71
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Over the past several years I have developed a concern that the critical faculties of a great number of people have become impaired in the ability to understand and evaluate The Arts as they exist in our present culture. It is my sometimes worry that the Post-World War II period has seen the destruction in many, both artist and layman, of what may be termed the aesthetic edge—the artistic sensitivity that exists within a person. For, just as this aesthetic edge can be sharpened and fine-honed with proper study, self-discipline and training, it can be dulled and destroyed by constant exposure to the corroding effects of the vulgar, the false, and the inept in The Arts.

A problem for every man lies in recognizing those qualities of a piece of music, or a painting, or a play, or a poem, that make it a work of art or make it a fraud. For now, I will be content to define the problem and break it down into what to me are three of its major aspects. It will be your task to weigh my arguments with the indulgence that you would wish for if you were in my shoes. I will, for simplicity's sake, concentrate mainly on the art of painting.

It is a frustrating experience for many of us these days to visit an art gallery and discover that it is filled from ceiling to floor—and probably from wall to wall—with what is collectively called modern art. It is not unusual to travel the length of the gallery and find nothing whatever in it that produces a pleasurable response in us. We may sometimes recognize the object that the artist had in mind to create in paint or sculpture, but why he bothered to make it, or dared to show it, remains a mystery.

But do we dare reveal our inability to appreciate and respond to many creations of contemporary artists? Those who are skilled and schooled in such matters, or pretend to be, may scoff at us. They are proficient—we are deficient. They feel clever—we feel stupid. But why are we unable to appreciate so much of today's artistic production? I must warn you that I intend to explore the matter with the obvious bias of one who has lived in reverent appreciation of the rational in all of the arts. By "rational" I really mean the incorporation of the quality into the work of art that early Renaissance humanists called "right reason."
There is a vast field of scientific study aimed at analyzing human response in terms of psychological cause and effect. I do not reject the data pouring forth from this source, but merely acknowledge it in moving on to a more primitive body of data; i.e., the aesthetic theories, and critical observations, of some of the philosophers and artists whose reputations and writings have survived the test of time. For as André Malraux has pointed out in his brilliant book, *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, just as the artist tries to immunize his creative work against time, “A work . . . becomes a work of art in virtue of being outside time.”¹ And of course if this test of time applies to painting, it also pertains to endeavors of art in literature and other fields as well.

Plato in his *Timaeus* dialogue explains that, “God devised the gift of sight for us so that we might observe the movements which have been described by reason in the heavens and apply them to the motions of our own mind which are akin to them, so far as what is troubled can claim kinship with what is serene.”² A bit farther along he observes that rhythm was given to us, “to help us in dealing with what is unmeasured and chaotic in the minds of most of us.”³

Writer upon writer points out the common chords of rhythm, order and balance in all branches of the arts. Poetry, music, and the dance clearly depend upon these. So do sculpture and painting and when they are missing from a work by choice, chance, or the ineptness of the artist, the lack is conveyed inside us by our own powers of perception. Chaos in anything is disturbing, even frightening, and we tend to reject it when we see it on the canvas or in the plastic arts merely because it is contrary to our natural instincts.

How do we know that so much of modern art is without rhythm, order and balance? Is it there but we cannot comprehend through ignorance? Does the fault, dear Brutus, lie within ourselves? And one last question: what is abstract expressionism? The last question is necessary because that is the school or style arising from what Katherine Kuh describes as the break-up of traditional art forms.

Miss Kuh, in commenting upon the painting of Jackson Pollock says, “Very different in motivation from surrealism, abstract expressionism was not concerned with symbols of the unconscious, but with the artist’s spontaneous feelings at the moment of painting. Abstract expressionism and especially Jackson Pollock were the final denial of all that Renaissance and Classical Art stood for.”⁴

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³ Ibid., p. 28.
She added that Pollock “... created a new kind of fury to echo the fury within himself.” One can’t help but wonder at the durability of such a great passion, and ponder whether the evidence of it via paintbrush on canvas is of interest as art or merely as a psychic efflux. In her comment on a painting by William DeKooning entitled “Excavation” Miss Kuh observes that the picture “... with its all-over pattern and warm loam-like color, has to do with the sensations of digging into the earth, and possibly into oneself.” After reading that, I had the impression that the author had reached very far into the realm of speculation.

The artist Frank Kline confesses, “I don’t paint a given object—a figure or a table; I paint an organization that becomes a painting.” Miss Kuh in talking about a painting of Pierre Soulages that has no name, but only a date, explains, “For both artist and viewer, meaning relies on the gratification of rich pigment deftly manipulated. In other words, the paint itself becomes at once the raison d’être and the image.” We have just been informed that for this painting at least, the medium is the message!

So, now we have one reason for our dilemma as viewers in not understanding a great many of the paintings that are included in exhibits today. The problem is that in abstract expressionism the artist often has nothing to convey to us. If we do think we have found a meaning, quite probably it is one evoked entirely within ourselves. Perhaps the artists, relying entirely upon the subjective creativity of the viewers for effect, are taking Oscar Wilde seriously in his statement that, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.”

Another kind of painting that confronts us these days is that which admittedly does contain the representation of a recognizable object. It may be the enlarged picture of a tin can, complete with label, or a character from a comic strip. The artist has used meticulous care—the rendition is perfect, and the reaction is that here is the work of someone who should get “A” in mechanical drawing, but who is woefully lacking in imagination.

The subject is prosaic; the message is that printed on the can’s label or found innocently scrawled within the picture’s confines. As Aristotle points out in the poetics, “The ludicrous is only one species of the ugly.”

Another painting hanging close by may be concerned with human anatomy. The chances are excellent that an entire figure will not

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid. p. 102.
8 Ibid. p. 102.
9 Hesketh Pearson, Oscar Wilde, His Life and Wit, p. 132.
10 Aristotle, “Poetics,” in Carritt, p. 32.
be there, however, but just a selected portion rendered with photographic precision. As counterpoint to pictures of this kind we find enormous plastic sculptured pieces placed strategically about the gallery. These are, seemingly, reconstructions of the entrails of fabulous monsters, or giant earthworms, or both. Yes, the organic element is definitely included in contemporary art.

Still another type of painting is that which depicts a subject that is sordid, mean or ugly. Satire with its sharp teeth has its place in art as witness the drawings of Hogarth, Grosz or Daumier. But when there is no purpose revealed in the picture except to move the viewer to feel disgust and perhaps admit that ugliness exists, what credit can we give to the piece as art?

The second aspect of the problem then, appears also to focus upon the artist. It is that the artist must utilize his genius within the framework of what is aesthetically acceptable and understandable to the sensitive viewer, and it is not a sufficient excuse on the part of artists or gallery directors to say that it is the viewers' limitations that make a painting misunderstood—or not understood at all. Tolstoy has commented upon this by observing, “To say that a work of art is good, but incomprehensible to the majority of men, is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but that most people can’t eat it.”

The third and last aspect of the problem, I feel, is that which concerns the taste—or aesthetic edge—of the gallery visitor. To consider this we must swing the mirror around until we see ourselves squarely in it. We have contended that there is good art and bad art; and that there are paintings and sculpture with a great message and some with a poor message; and very many with no message at all. But when we reach a conclusion as to the merits of a particular painting, that conclusion is the end result of our entire lifetime of conditioning. Thomas Hobbes who is emphatic in his philosophical observations and conclusions says in Leviathan, “Whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth good: and the object of his hate, and aversion evil, and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable.”

If Hobbes is right, and we see the evidence of this particular truth all around us, then we must realize that we can destroy our natural abilities to appreciate what is good and reject what is bad. The woodland Indian of Wisconsin Territory days, who could track game with uncanny skill because of his highly developed and unshattered sensitivity toward what he saw, heard, smelled, touched or tasted, is in great contrast to the Modern American who overeats three times a day and falls asleep at the symphony. We can-

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12 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, quoted in E. F. Carritt, Philosophes of Beauty, p. 56.
not as a steady diet read books in the Last Exit to Brooklyn genre and then appreciate the delicate characterization in James’ The Wings of the Dove. We cannot drown ourselves daily in rock music, and hope to experience the thrill that lurks for the responsive listener in a Brahms concerto. We cannot live and work surrounded by psychedelic posters without becoming color-numb.

Milton believed that for a man to become a great poet, he must rigidly follow rules of self-discipline and education. He must become in effect a priest in the purity of the conditioning he applies to his natural talents. That kind of life is, of course, beyond the reach or resolve of most of us. But we can resolve to avoid constant exposure to those things that would certainly dull our aesthetic edge.

What we do as individuals will not change the world of art. Painters and sculptors will continue to pour forth a never-ending line of questionable artifacts. And where these probable frauds would normally perish under the dead weight of their inherent lack of artistic merit, the directors of many art centers and some affluent collectors march forth in the role of deus ex machina, purchase the doomed pieces, and preserve them forever in our museums and galleries.

We must fight the good fight to defend and support the artists who produce honest art. To do this we have an obligation to know what is good in art and have faith in our knowledge. We may lose the battle to the frauds and their sponsors, but as Ajax said, “Oh Zeus . . . if so be that we must die, let us die in the light!”

Lists of Works Consulted

