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Modern Art: The Celebration of Man's Freedom*

by

Philip Hampton

Modern art is a nightingale's song, it is newly mown hay, it is the feel of a soft summer breeze and it is the rising of a golden moon across the bay. Modern art is a paradox — it is not new nor is it ancient. Modern art began before history, for sights, sounds, feeling and smells have always been with man. Therefore, the summation of all of man's experiences makes modern art. It is difficult for man to have only a single experience, and if he did, it would hardly be worth expressing in an art form.

It is not the beauty of the bird's song or the enchantment of the moonrise that the artist must express, but it is rather the complete freedom that God has given man, which allows him the enjoyment of the sights and sounds of things around him. If man could not experience sensory things and sing songs of praise or dramatize the ritual of the wondrous sights and feeling, man would indeed be a prisoner in a nightmare of ugliness.

But there are times when men refuse to look, though they have eyes, they refuse to understand what they hear; and, as Aeschylus said, they fashion all things like confused shapes in dreams.

For many centuries, wise men knew that a civilization is measured by the "aesthetic test that this measurement is as Toynbee said, the "surest as well as the subtlest."

Man's first "aesthetic test" was passed before civilization. It was an expression of freedom, for man's first aesthetic expression was his celebration of freedom from want. Some 10,000 years ago prehistoric man made a mark that was to express his freedom from want, or, indeed, his desire to be free from want. He drew upon his cavern walls pictures of animals that represented his food supply. These cave paintings served as a ritual, a commemoration, a purger of his fears, and as a personal statement about a transitory experience. For the most part, art has served these purposes every since.

One of the earliest developments of the ancient Egyptian was the picture plane. It showed to all men that the Egyptian had achieved a degree of freedom from primeval cultures. The ancient Egyptian must have been elated to know that he had discovered a system for living that offered man so many rewards, and it also offered liabilities. But men learn sometimes slowly that freedom and responsibility travel the same paths.

*Address delivered at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Mo., February 24, 1966.

At first, the Egyptian artists must have experienced much delight in discovering means and modes of expression in their art. But too quickly were they disposed to settle for an only way to depict an idea.

In their great urgency to express their ideas, they denied themselves a latitude of individual freedom, for the authorities of Egypt demanded that all art comply with rigid regulations. The images of gods in ancient societies impelled their artists to suppress original thoughts. The Egyptian priest, for example, demanded of the artist, for the most part, that they reveal the human form in an unnatural position, that is, the head was almost always shown in profile while the torso was shown in a frontal position. The legs were shown in a profile plane parallel to the head. The Greeks were less restricted, and they sought to gain truth but in its most idealistic form. This point reminds me that it was Picasso who said that art must be a lie if truth is to be found.

When one destroys the love of excitement and discovery of individual practice and thought, one will have unwittingly destroyed all that is complete to the individual. Contain the thoughts and actions of the writers, painters, poets, composers, sculptors and architects, and you have locked up some of the more significant prodders, antagonist, motivators and harassers of our civilized consciences.

Centuries after the fall of Rome, art followed a path of flat decorative design or a frenzy of curves that for the most part had no relation to realism. These forms, unrelated to realism as they were, reflected man's innermost desires, and they were the dominating force of their day.

It is natural for men to react to the dominating fears, ideals or fantasies of their day. When men were dominated by the fear of loosing their souls, they built cathedrals. When they were dominated by the fear of loosing their bodies, they built castles. But, even then, they never lost an opportunity to decorate their surroundings. Their castles and churches gave them a feeling of security — a feeling of freedom. And they commemorated this feeling of being free with stained glass windows, tapestries, sculpture, organic architecture and illuminations.

Men of today have fears, too. They fear losing their bodies and their souls. But their fear is the possibility of loosing their freedom. To be sure, there are today men who have contracted the fear syndrome and have sought surcease in the worship of numbers, over-productivity, conformity and destruction. They are members of the robot-thermo-annihilation cult; their chief products are fear, hate, and bombs; their goal is a lock-step march to nonentity.

There are other men of today who are not responders to programmed punched cards. These men do not respond to the black magic of push-buttoned machines, which think for people but not of people. People are not machines; they cannot live for long with machine-like thoughts; people need sustenance in the broadest sense, for men do not live by bread alone. A man may surely eat well and still feel empty; he may set his stomach free but leave his mind imprisoned.

Throughout the world, the modern artists of today, are refuting the effects of the machine and those who blindly worship machine-like thinking. In one country, a poet was sentenced to five years at "useful labor," i. e., hauling manure, simply because he wrote poems that appealed to his own emotions. It was Plato who advised that the artist be controlled, because, as he implied, the persuasive powers of the artist were often greater than the politician. It might be that the power of the artist lies in his closeness to human conditions.

The human condition must be free. Freedom to think what one wishes to think and freedom to be responsible for what one thinks are natural rights of modern man. Man is obliged to maintain the freedom to think as he wishes; he is further obliged to reserve all other men's right to this same freedom. If he fails to champion the rights of other men, then he has automatically given up his last vestige of freedom. For no man can hold another man in bondage and be free himself.

Responsible freedom means discipline, self-control, character and orderly conduct. Freedom in one sense of the word can imply that one man has a priestly and exalted privilege over another.

Notwithstanding the gift of life, freedom is man's most precious gift. It is a gift which too often must be seized by those who are not yet free. It is nonetheless, whether a gift or not, a valuable possession. Indeed, it would seem self-evident that most men eventually prefer death to enslavement.

So frequently during the sundry epochs of man in his quest for freedom, art has been a force, directly or indirectly, reflecting his determination to be free. Art has been an inspiration which has guided man on to his greatest ideal. Art has been produced by man as an expression of gratitude, and as a joyous song to his gods for being free. Man's destiny lies in his ability to keep alive his creative thoughts. No thought can be creative unless it comes from a mind that is unfettered, unshackled and free.

Art is the articulation of feeling. It is also the articulate symbol of freedom. It symbolizes man's freedom to entertain whatever ideas that suit his fancy, and also his right to reject whatever ideas his fellow men propose. This license only belongs to free men. In a free society, art is freely explored, although it has not been accepted by the masses. This is the highest example of individual freedom. Stop one artist from creating and you stop the very spirit of freedom, for what you do unto the least you do unto all. Stifle one individual, and you have begun to stifle all individuals. Individual activity cannot be tolerated in a closed society, for in a totalitarian society, artists are told what is acceptable to the masses. The artists must then produce what is expected of them or simply not produce at all. What new visions can be created under these conditions? Solomon said it best about this kind of condition when he said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." It is our hope that our society does not perish for lack of vision.

We must prepare to throw off the old when it has lost its usefulness, for it is better to consider the new with bewilderment than to rot in contentment with the old. But we can expect nothing new or good if we do not prepare our citizens of tomorrow to respect the creative mind and assume the responsibility for keeping alive the spirit and the ritual of creative exploration. For if the spirit of man is neglected, his spirit like an electrical short circuit, will cause the light of civilization to suddenly go off.

It has become the obligation of the modern artist to prevent this short circuit. It is his obligation to attack the visual complacency of our time. It has become the obligation of the musical composer to thwart aural obtuseness. The modern poet must arouse man with a verbal earthquake.

The modern artist has too often been accused of being ludicrous, ridiculous, and striving to chock. Or, put in another way, the modern artist seeks to be glaringly evident. He has had to use a very conspicuous art to call attention, not to himself, but to his cause. His cause is a non-verbal message which purports to save man from his most portentous enemy—himself.

It is not so important that we read the message of a singular modern artist as it is for us to understand the communication of all modern art in its totality. For this purpose, we might briefly and schematically look into a few of the developments of modern art. It must be remembered that modern art is not new, nor is it ancient, and it certainly is not always non-objective. For the sake of clarity here, modern art is confined to the twentieth century, and to periods just prior to the twentieth century. It is about this time in the history of art that we notice the arousal of human curiosity in what the artist was doing. It is also here that the artist learned, without doubt, that he could shock.

Certainly, the direct influences of twentieth century art did not begin exactly in 1900. It might be safe to say that 1878 marked one of the beginnings of an art that shocked human beings. It was this year that marked the end of Cezanne's exhibiting with the group, that is Monet, Pissarro, *et al.* It was at this time that Cezanne isolated himself from the group and began abstracting landscapes with interlocking planes.

It was in 1880 when twenty-seven year-old Van Gogh began to paint. He was a precursor of the twentieth century mode of expression. He was a man who valued freedom for others as well as for himself. And, his greatest contribution to freedom was the style that he used to express his deepest feeling. His "Red Vineyards" was the only painting that sold during his life.

Synthetism was partly a contribution of Paul Gauguin near the year of 1889. It dealt with intensified, exotic colors, flattened forms and heavy outlines.

Matisse, about 1905 realized the impact of color and recognized that it could be free from mere additional description of a thing; for example, a face, to Matisse, could be red or green or indeed both.

Finally, as a test of these ideas, a nebulous group known as the "Wild Beast" evolved. It was a shortlived group, to be sure, but Matisse was part of it and his contribution was important.

At about the same time of the "Wild Beast", the Bridge group was founded in Germany. The work of the Bridge was highly emotional and personal. It made many sociological, biological, political and religious statements. Their work was often ugly, revolting and extremely antagonistic. The power of the movement lasted only two years. Some of its members were Emile Nolde, Edvard Munch, and James Ensor.

Some years after the Bridge, the Blue Rider group was established in Germany. Their work very quickly became non-objective and indeed more cheerful than the Bridge group. Kandinsky is an example of this group. In 1912, he published his treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and in 1920 he produced his first completely non-representational work. Painting became free of subject matter and yet Kandinsky never thought of his paintings as completely divorced from nature.

The Blue Rider group was international in scope, for example, the "Four Blues" were Kandinsky, who was born in Moscow, studied and taught in Germany and finally went to France; Jawlensky, a Russian; Feininger, an American who taught in Germany, and Paul Klee, a Swiss who taught in Germany.

The man with eighty styles of painting, as one critic stated, was Picasso. Picasso discovered the impact of African sculpture, the volumes of Cezanne, and a bizarre savagery. Picasso's style finally came to be known as Cubism.

It is not known where the collage began, but Georges Braque used it in his search for textures. Braque probably pursued collage in an effort to establish his right to paint as he pleased and not to paint after the slavish convention that only stressed technical skill. It was Braque, more than any other artist, who made the harmonious fusion of Fauvist color with Cubist form.

Duchamp, speaking of an art form, Dadiasm, declared it as ". . . a way to get out of a state of mind — to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past; to get away from cliché's — to get free." In brief, the essence of this statement represents what all men desire. But all men cannot express or share the same freedom as does the artist. Most men are forced to find freedom in a vicarious sense, and collectively, the artist provides this condition. The modern artist, sensing, with an intense perceptive quality, that he alone is responsible for having kept alive the influences that caused, for example, the creative designing of a building, a chair, a book jacket or a trinket, shares with all men the symbols that remind them that their spirits are free. Illustratively, all men are reminded of their free choices of ideas when the blinking qualities of an op art, a painting, which magnetically demands their attention for a fleeting moment. Man is reminded that he is free to pursue that which others might call bizarre. Whether it is Pop,

Op or Kinetic art, it is good art simply because it opens the door to adventure; it permits man to entertain his most haphazard ideas.

Modern art also reminds this generation that haphazard thinking is a birthright of man. In spite of itself, it is a practice that is enjoyed by many. We are warned that the day haphazard or accidental discovery is stifled, is the day we all have induced a terrible microbe into the peculiarly human structure of things. It will be a day when we will have caused deliberative and eruditional activities to dry up forever. The pride of men will seldom allow them to admit that the precursor to many great ideas have been accidental and haphazard thoughts. It was the late John Kennedy whose statement helped us understand so much about our attitudes, when he said:

“When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations.”

The poet, William Stafford must have been thinking along those same lines when he wrote:

“Quiet in the earth a drop of water came,
and the little seed spoke: “Sequoia is my name.”

It is the challenge of free men everywhere to look for the peculiar qualities of all things. It is incumbent upon men to rejoice when they experience new ideas, not because all new ideas are good but because new ideas mean that man is still alive and subjected to the task peculiar to all free men—that of making individual decisions.

Let us hope while we evaluate the symbols of our freedom and the humans who produce them that we will allow no one to tell us what we must accept as an art form. Let no one tell us how we must make a human expression. Let not the critics, the government, the snobs, nor the nextdoor neighbor tell us how we must fashion and create a true work of art.

The seed of man's freedom and the hope for the harvest thereafter, lies in the breast of the creative mind. Let all the world stand and cheer when the modern artist rises to offer his own individualistic soul, which truly, is his ode to man's freedom.

Modern art, in its timeless continuum, is the sum of all men's greatness. When it ceases to be heard, the birds will have stopped singing, when it can no longer be felt, the breezes will have come to naught. Man will have become imprisoned in an irrefutable ignorance—he will have been snared in a horrible trap of ugliness forever. By the grace of God, long live modern art! Long live the symbol of freedom! Long live the celebration!