Art for Everyone’s Sake

Reading the posthumously published diary of Galeazzo Ciano with its references to the Italian version of the burning of the books I was again struck by the need of the Dictatorship, even of the relatively ramshackle Italian variety, to bend the word and forms of the society to its purposes. Mussolini, like Hitler and Stalin was sensitive not only to words that might conceal criticisms of his politics but to the painting and sculpture that would record the time in another way but one as dangerous apparently as that of the printing press. The Nazis some years after they took power put on an exhibition to illustrate the odiousness of what they called degenerate art, in Munich and Berlin, and in it were almost all the great painters of the 20th century owned by German museums from Picasso, Grosz and Beckmann to Chagall. The paintings were later sold at auction in Switzerland with the exception of a few that could be hidden or filched as in the case of some canvasses preempted by Goering for trading purposes. In the place of this “degenerate” art came romanticized and often
outsize canvasses—pictures showing the Fuehrer clad in armor with a banner in hand and mounted on a charger; the artist’s mystique of the hero, adapted from beer hall murals, was proof even against Hitler’s deep seated aversion to horses. Or a family group might be shown as another proof of the healthy instinct of the race untouched by intellectual or foreign taints. A picture for example of a trio of nudes on a sofa, a mother gazing into the distance while her young son with a sour expression plays on a flute and her little daughter morosely holds a flower. In Russia, too, any evidences of experimental art have long been removed from the galleries. The innovators, Russian or foreign, are stored away out of sight, the contemporary pictures shown are posters for the revolution, and the emissaries of the Axis and of the Bolsheviks must have felt themselves comfortably at home as they visited the exhibitions in their respective capitals during the period of the friendship pacts.

Art gives rise to violent emotions even in cultures where it is not native but exists by means of collections gathered from somewhere else. In the closed society of the totalitarian states it takes the same forms, whatever the politics or ideology, and these are never in any sense revolutionary but on the contrary stale repetitions of the techniques and mannerisms of the past, differing from them only in the colors of the flags and the faces of the new leaders. It is reactionary art, as the regimes it serves are reactionary. It transfers the party slogans to a canvass. It is likely that artists somewhere in these vast areas are creating the plastic equivalent of a Dr. Zhivago but if so they must, like Pasternak, resign themselves to the studied rejection of the official institutions or the chance, sometime, of an appearance in the markets of the free world.*

In cultures like those of the American cities where art has been more often transplanted than home-grown it is always far from an inert ingredient. Whether the institution that shows it is privately or publicly controlled or a mixture of the two it continues to reflect the unsettled and often conflicting tastes of the community—of the boards composed of brokers, and bankers, and lawyers, and the men and women of affairs who for one reason or another feel called upon to spend a portion of their energies and money for what they intend to be the enrichment of the cultural life of the community. Their choices of what is to go into the collections are limited not so much by their political as by their aesthetic boundaries. When Yale was given the opportunity of getting the Jarves collection of Italian primitives for a relatively small sum its Corporation did not seize upon the opportunity as though released by an avalanche of long dammed up passion, nor did Chicago’s Art Institute promptly and gratefully accept the great collection of French post impressionists that was offered to it. The trustees of such institutions are not likely to be (although there are brilliant exceptions) the native aestheticians who know in their bones what a good painting is, nor are they prone to pick and retain as trusted advisors the imaginative and often off-beat characters who can act boldly and intelligently for them. And yet, these boards too may lurch toward the truth; in both these cases the collections were accepted although by narrow margins.

*Since these lines were written an article in The New York Times of December 2 reported as follows: “Premier Khrushchev inspected today one of the first exhibitions of Soviet abstract paintings and rejected the works as ‘foreign to our people.’

“He personally scolded the assembled artists for breaking away from ideologically approved socialist realism. The Soviet leader thus apparently signalled the repression of a brief upsurge of freedom in the fields of Soviet painting and sculpture.”
Four main divisions of administering the display of paintings and sculpture, and indeed the higher learning in general to the public have appeared in our day. One is that of the state institution in countries where the state is all-powerful. A second is that of the public institute or museum established within the democratic polity as in the case of post-war Germany, France, Italy and the other countries west of the iron curtain, and to a limited degree in the United States. These like their sister institutions, the state universities, may possess a good deal of professional autonomy in the way they are administered but in the long run, and in controversial fields especially, they may and in fact have often become subject to purely political pressures that have little to do with the truth or beauty of what they hang or teach. The third and largest group is that of the mixed institutes where private benefactions have made the collections possible but contributions in the form of land or buildings or services are made by the city or state. The last group is the purely private institution that accepts no grants-in-aid other than those rendered by tax exemption.

The first group, the institutions of the totalitarian state, has little or nothing to show for its years of activity outside its inheritance from other centuries and the additional contribution of the technicians who without risk to their jobs may restore and piece together as well as letter signs that now say, “Of our era,” instead of “A.D.” The second group has produced a competent corps of specialists and bureaucrats to run its shows and exhibits who, it should be noted, went over almost to a man to the new political order when their institutions came under the control of their respective Leaders. They must have sorrowed over the loss of the great contemporary masters but they nevertheless took them down from the walls and hung the chromos of the revolution with the same care and devotion they had lavished on the masterpieces. These academicians and administrators went along, no doubt with longing and nostalgia for the past but with infinitely more concern for the exigent present and their pensions to come. The émigrés moved out with their own sorrows to embellish the scholarship of the free world.

The mixed institutes, universities and museums and the purely private ones operate with other advantages and hazards. Their trustees, whatever their human and entrepreneurial merits, are not often people whose temperaments and comprehension are tuned to the wave lengths of those broken surfaces and patterns that have characterized the painters of the 20th century. Whether their motives are indeed those they proffer at their meetings and on public occasions, motives arising from a genuine desire to upgrade the tastes of the community, or whether they are in fact more closely related to forwarding in a polite form their own social or business advancement or merely their release from the blacks and reds of the balance sheets that occupy them daily, does not greatly affect the kinds of decisions they make. The world of art is essentially, for most of these people, mysterious and foreign; they feel themselves safe within it only so long as they are dealing with accepted names, and the professionals they employ must operate cautiously. Unless the directors and curators enjoy special prestige or have extraordinarily persuasive powers they must recommend pictures to be bought and shows to be hung that come within the range of the tastes and prejudices of the members of boards who are comfortable only with a good press and the approval of other people like themselves. But however
ignorant, amateur or genuinely talented the members of such boards may be, they have the possibility of bucking any official line, and in fact it was such a group of dissidents that backed the Armory show of 1913 against the officially intrenched, academic lifelessness.

It is actually by way of such or similar patronage that art has been nurtured and cultivated from the beginning of the Renaissance. These groups give the one indispensable condition to the survival of the artist and the one that is denied him in the Iron Curtain countries—the opportunity to exhibit. For nothing is trickier or more unpredictable than the modes of acceptance and rejection of art and the words that describe them become as quickly historical as yesterday’s slang. Non-representational art, the wildness of the 20’s is the academic art of the 60’s and the academic art of the early and mid 20th century, including Rockwell Kent, hangs in Soviet museums.

In the great periods of Italy and France, Holland and Spain, Germany and England, the individualist tribe of artists was also supported by patrons who themselves were more likely to be princes of the sword and purse than of the brush and palette or hammer and chisel. When writers moved out from the patronage of the man of power to the multiple decisions of the market place they did so through the medium of the printing press, a mechanism in general not adaptable to the production of works of art in media other than that of the pen. The painter and sculptor are still beholden to the much more restricted market of the collectors and museums who in turn are influenced by the specialists of the trade—the dealers and critics, and such specialists the public if it likes can ignore. With the affluence accompanying the post-war economic booms, the swollen budgets of the tax exempt institutions together with the increasing shortage of works of art even obscure rural institutions have added their share to the wave of inflation that has engulfed the art market. More and more people who never before were concerned with art have turned to it. And thus new problems arise to cloud the picture. In the race for materials to hang and show, in the flight to values that have both a price tag and evidences of the untagable human spirit, in the harried search for funds boards of trustees of the museums take refuge from their confusions in a public relations approach in their choice of both personnel and shows. They must impress the local donors, and the public at large as well as one another. They must choose as directors people who get along in the community, something that artists themselves have rarely done, and rely on their recommendations as to what to buy without for the most part themselves knowing, unless the painting has a certified name, whether it is worth having or not. These boards are likely to be timid; their worst fear is adverse publicity, they want to buy the sure thing even if it costs over two million dollars. But in the multiplicity of such boards there are always some who will brave the wrath of the press and put on exhibitions that have survived to convert their journalistic and other critics. Some of the museums, the institutes, despite the philistine pressures from within and without have managed to maintain a high level of taste and selection in what they have bought and displayed—higher for example than the purely public museums in France that in the 19th century bought the seemingly safe academic art in preference to the superb work of the innovators much of which went instead to the grateful wilderness of America. Nor is the so-called avant garde immune from its own kind of
fossilization—their cues are merely given by centers other than those of provincial acceptance.

What then is there to say of this chaos of money and opinion, of the conflict between the amateurs and the professionals? Perhaps that this is the very way art is sustained. The competition between museums, the open criticism of artists and writers on art as well as that of the few people in any community who are competent to judge, has provided among the institutions of private, and mixed private and public control, the constant scrutiny and exhortation to higher things that keep them from being merely the preservers of the records of other centuries, or what might well be the hyperaesthetic choices of the unfettered professionals. The professionals left to themselves can produce another kind of tyranny, as we see in the frozen liberal stances of our great universities where much the same uniformity is required in economics and politics as it is in the one-party countries. If the art institutes in the United States are not powerful forces in helping in the procreation of a new speech in art they are also far removed from the world described in the remarkable work of the Rumanian writer, Petru Dumitriu, where as in the case of all the totalitarian societies every word, every gesture must be considered in the light of the political constellations of the day or week or month. The Western world is producing a deeper and more widely diffused art than the Eastern, a more revolutionary art and by way of its very conflicts and inconsistencies, its squares and jags and strange figures in inner and outer spaces, a more human one.

—E. D.

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