

André Masson, one of the great French Surrealist painters now in the United States, wrote the accompanying article specially for Art in Australia a few weeks after his arrival from France towards the end of the last year.

LIFE AND LIBERTY

Since the dawn of Romanticism, we are unable to conceive of Art as living under any other aegis than that of Liberty.

The true artist does not need to know if "the gods" are dead, or if others are about to be born. His mission is to express the mythical urge, but without "orders." Our time is one of metamorphosis. We are living in an extremely disturbed moment of history, and it is not necessary, either, that the painter should conceal the disquietude of his epoch.

Neither Michelangelo, nor Goya, nor Van Gogh, for example, are reassuring. And one might contend that Hieronymus Bosch, with his monsters, his demons, and his shades, express the time and his milieu better than certain of his contemporaries who specialise in painting the banalities of life.

For the dream, with all the anxious questions which it poses and tries to solve, is a part of life. The dream, with its cortège of secular images, seeks a representation of our deepest instincts: love, hunger, dread - those instincts which lie at the very root of our being.

Liberty is now threatened to such an extent in certain countries of the world, where total oppression reigns, that not only is the most servile submission to what is called "The State" demanded of the artist, but it is even suggested that his work contain only euphemistic scenes executed in "sugary", vulgar techniques.

It is as though those who have let loose the very worst elements, the most ferocious emotions, and who have committed the most deadly acts, were desperately trying to find compensation in a stupidly sentimental "State Art"; as if they had to throw an opera cloak around the tragedy, had to hide the blood, which screams for vengeance, under a rain of paper roses.

In this night of the spirit, only in the United States and the British Empire, by respecting individual expression, are maintaining the essential values of civilisation.

"On ne se baigne pas deux fois
dans le même fleuve." (Héraclite.)

One argument used against modern art, by the reactionaries of France, is that of Tradition. It is in this name that yesterday they condemned Courbet, Manet, Cézanne. It is in this name that today they attack the Cubists and the Surrealists.

The most elementary reflection upon this question show us, without possible refutation, that true tradition is, in its very essence, changing. It is itself endless advent and ruin.

He who aspires to the expression of new beauty will never listen to the sirens of false tradition. He knows that his contemporaries are not those whose eyes and ears are always half a century behind. The desirable balance between form and spirit - between the container and what it contains - does not depend upon any rule; and it is not true that the epochs which have been the most favourable to this equilibrium are those in which [p.12:] authority was absolute, rather than those open to human brotherhood.

In any case, sympathy ought to be accorded to those who, in the presence of forms that have outworn their usefulness, turn aside from them, and choose to set out upon adventure. It need scarcely be remarked, concerning those who cling to false traditions, that, in clamouring for classic values, they only end by ridiculous parody.

"Rien n'est incompréhensible."
(Compte de Lautréamont.)

“Ce qu’il y a d’admirable dans le fantastique
c’est qu’il n’y a plus de fantastique, il n’y a
plus que le réel.”
(André Breton.)

The reproach of being incomprehensible is often made by those who, despite their good intentions, are taken by surprise, when confronted with new forms. Or perhaps they suspect the innovator of being deliberately obscure. There never was an artist worthy of the name who did not wish to communicate with other people. Great art was always akin. It is always profoundly in accord with the human family.

Although it must be recognized that the creative power of the artist surges irresistibly from the “troubled depths of his being,” it is in the movement of love that this contradiction is resolved. That is why great art, whatever its object may be, can never be disparaging or debasing.

Hogarth transfigures the misfortunes of the courtesan. Goya exalts the horrors of war. And the tortures, convulsions, and corpses do not exist with which Rubens does make a treat for the eye. Art, at its source, is sympathy, the gift of one’s self. The fervent desire for communion through free expression.

All discoveries, in whatever domain they may fall, lead inevitably to the development of human personality. Albert Einstein has changed the dimensions of the universe; Sigmund Freud has clarified the depths [p. 17:] of the subconscious; modern poetry, music, and painting have given us a “new sensation”.

The forces of regression, which have engrossed a large part of the world by means of treason and violence, surge vainly against the pioneers of our century. What has been gained at the cost of so much unselfishness and fervour, will not perish, in spite of persecution by those who have no more imagination than to try keep mankind in a state of humiliation.

What counts in the history of man, is the free expression, constantly being renewed, of life and destiny. The artist, like the scholar, longs for the ultimate. He surpasses necessity, and he presents to his century, a fascinating vision.

Abbildungen:

Foto von André Masson

“L’Orage,” 1938

“Le Fauteuil Louis XVI,” 1938

“Le Printemps,” 1938

“The Sun” from Lithograph

“Métamorphose des Amants,” 1938