
Art Scenario in Europe at the End of the Second World War

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Abstract:

The situation that existed in Europe at the end of the Second World War can be estimated by contrasting the achievements of the later two decades. The first of these decades is the one—the years 1939-48. The other is chosen more arbitrarily, but it too includes world war-I, the years 1914-18. In the earlier decade art was everywhere in a ferment. In France the post-impressionist movement was developing the more explicit phases known as Fauvism and Cubism. In Italy there was the Futurism of Marinetti and Severini, and the Metaphysical school of Chirico and Carra. Dadaism was born in Zurich and was evolved into Surrealism in France and Germany. In Germany and Scandinavia the Expressionist school came into existence; in Russia Malevich, Gabo, Pevsner and Tatlin launched the suprematist movement, to develop after the Revolution into Constructivism; in Holland Moridrian and Van Doesburg were establishing the inovement known as Neo-plasticism; even England had a new movement—the Vorticism of Wyndham Lewis. Let us ask rather what survives from the couple of agitated decades.

Key words: Art, Europe, World War II

Great art, of course, does not need a theory or a movement to justify it. It may be objected that there was nothing very healthy about this ferment—that it was a feverish state of

nerves symptomatic of the social unrest which came to a head in the First World War. I have no wish to deny a certain connection between the social and economic condition of Europe in this decade and the art of this same period. Any interaction of this kind cannot be isolated within decades, and I do not see any fundamental difference of a *social* kind between the two periods—at least, the differences due to social revolution might be assumed to favour the later decade. We cannot claim finality of judgment, but year by year it becomes clearer that in the art of painting if in no other art, the unquestioned masterpieces of our epoch belong to that decade—the best works of *Chirico*, of *Matisse*, of *Leger*, of *Braque* and, I would say of *Picasso*. It may be a prejudice of mine, but I know it, is shared by other critics, who also believe that the genius of Picasso was never so clearly and so firmly revealed as in the canvases of his so-called 'Classical Cubist' period.

Twenty years pass and we were once more involved in preparations for war and war itself. A decade superficially similar to that of 1909-18 has followed and we can now look back on it as objectively as our despondency allows. What is quite obvious is that there has been no general ferment at all comparable to that of the earlier decade. Not a single new movement in art has been born, and the only new '*ism*' of any significance, existentialism, does not touch the plastic arts as yet. There are painters in Paris who claim to be existentialists, but their philosophy has no distinctive plastic expression that I can see.

Indeed, after the ferment of the 'teens and 'twenties, it is conceivable, indeed probable, that the natural phase to follow is one of refinement, distillation, or what in more philosophical terms we might call a synthesis. Many younger artists seem to be conscious of this necessary step, and in Paris in particular there was an apparent effort to retrace the paths of the past forty years, to plot a general direction, to advance again on an agreed point, profiting by the experiments and discoveries of the older generation. Admirable as much of this painting is—I

am referring to the work of artists like *Pignon*, *Lapicque*, *Manessier*, *Tal Coat*, *Gischia*, etc.—it seems to me to suffer from the defects of deliberateness: it is decidedly academic in spirit, I find more hope, because there is more enterprise, in the work of some of our young English painters. To them I shall come presently, but first let us consider the French situation, which is the situation of European art in general.

The modern movement in the arts which began to reveal itself in the first decade of the century was fundamentally revolutionary, and it affected all the arts—the prose of *Joyce* and the music of *Stravinsky* were as much a part of it as the paintings of *Picasso* or *Klee*. When I characterize this movement as *fundamentally revolutionary*, I attach a literal meaning to these well-worn words. There are two senses in which one can be revolutionary. One can set out with a definite aim—to replace a monarchy by a republic, for example—and if one achieves that aim, the revolution is complete, finished. One is no longer a revolutionary. But that is not the kind of revolutionary that *Picasso* was, or *Klee*, or *Joyce*—I am not so sure about *Stravinsky*. These painters and writers had no new constitution in their pockets: they did not know where they were going or what they might discover. They were quite sure about the sterility and rottenness of the academic standards which then prevailed everywhere, but they had no preconceived ideas about new standards. They were explorers, but they had no compass bearing. "*The important thing in art,*" *Picasso* once said, '*is not to seek, but to find*', and that might be given as the motto of the whole movement. These artists projected themselves into the future, into the unknown, not knowing what they would find, relying on the concrete evidence of their senses to find a way to the genuine work of art.

It might be here remarked that this attitude was anything but idealistic—it was, in fact, very much the attitude now defended by *Jean-Paul Sartre*, on the philosophical and political plane, as existentialist. *Sartre's* philosophy is said to derive from *Heidegger's* philosophy, but to a considerable extent

I believe it to be a philosophical synthesis based on the practical activity of modern art. It is not without significance that it is precisely in Paris, where the revolutionary attitude in art has prevailed so long, that this new philosophy has arisen. It was for the very good reason that art has in this respect anticipated philosophy.

A revolutionary philosophy, *Sartre* has said, must be a philosophy of transcendence. In political philosophy this would seem to mean that we must regard any immediate revolutionary attitude as contingent because the system of values at any time current in a society is a reflection of the structure of that society and tends to preserve it. When a revolution has been carried through, a new situation then exists which demands a new revolutionary attitude, an attitude which was not conceivable in the pre-revolutionary situation. The new systems of values could be the expression of a structure of society which does not yet exist, but which must be anticipated in order that what *does* exist may be transcended. *Sartre's* revolutionary man, therefore, 'must be a contingent being, unjustifiable but free, entirely immersed in the society that oppresses him, but capable of transcending this society by his efforts to change it'.

The revolutionary artist of whom Picasso was the most convenient prototype is precisely such a contingent being, entirely immersed in his visible world, but making every effort to transcend the symbols which were conventionally used to represent that world. The revolutionary artist was born into a world of clichés, of stale images and signs which no longer pierce the consciousness to express reality. He therefore invents new symbols, perhaps a whole new symbolic system. Then the academicians come along and try to generalize his symbols, to conventionalize them, to make them good for all time. Many artists, once revolutionary, fell into the same contented frame of mind. We might not call them reactionaries, but in the ceaseless unfolding of existence, it is reactionary to stand still.

I think it will be obvious that between this conception of perpetual revolution and what is usually meant by a synthesis there exists a contradiction. A synthesis is merely the meeting-place of two ideas, and from their conjunction arises a new idea. But each new idea is in its turn a thesis which merges into an endless dialectical chain, and the only finality is something we agree to call the Truth, which seems to recede with every step we take towards it.

With these considerations in mind, we should approach the whole conception of a synthesis of styles with a certain degree of caution, perhaps of scepticism. The desire for a synthesis of the arts is part of that general longing for social stability which is the natural reaction to any period of revolution. In effect, this is nothing but a more or less conscious determination to consolidate the power of new social elite, and 'classicism' is usually the catchword for the cultural aspects of such a consolidation. The reactionary—the man who wants to make a future identical with the past—seeks to establish recognized standards of taste, an official type of art, an academic tradition which is universally taught and automatically accepted. From this point of view, the revolutionary art of the period can be transformed into the academic art of the period of consolidation.

Let us next observe that this work of synthesis in the arts was not attempted by the originators of the revolution. Some of these originators—Picasso, above all—have continued to display a rest-less revolutionary energy. Even when, as in the case of Paul Klee, for example, the development was restricted to a very personal idiom, it remained consistent—not attempted to compromise with a general tradition of contemporary art. No: the search for a synthesis is the work of epigoni, of second generation disciples and followers, and not of the masters of the modern movement. The masters themselves remain revolutionary, or become openly reactionary (*Chirico, Derain*).

The work of those artists who remained revolutionary for a period of forty years must now be examined to see if we can detach any progressive elements. In my own opinion the best work of Picasso, Braque, Leger, Chirico, and, I would add, Rouault, belongs to the past—to the decade of 1908-17. I do not in any way dismiss their later work, which is rich and diverse and makes for a cumulative effect which cannot be ignored. But the high peaks of their extensive achievement lie in the distance.

The modern movement in art has four main phases or divisions, which are most conveniently labeled Realism, Expressionism, Cubism and Super realism. Realism does not come into question, though artists like Picasso and Matisse used a realistic style for particular purposes, and later we see the desirability of maintaining a tension between realism and abstraction. But in our historical circumstances Realism had contributed little or nothing to the development of modern consciousness. Expressionism has been significant for the Nordic peoples of Europe, especially for Scandinavia and Germany. But let us begin with Cubism, which has a certain chronological priority.

The cubism which was discovered and exploited for a few years by Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris, was *Analytical*. That is to say, it was directed to the revelation of an aesthetic aspect of the natural world, and it claimed, by reducing the appearance of objects to their significant forms, to tell us something about the essential nature of these objects. Juan Gris was not satisfied with such an analytical attitude. He wished to give priority to the formal values in composition, and he therefore established a theory and practice of *Synthetic* cubism. In *Synthetic* cubism, the realistic elements are subordinated to the architectural structure of the painting, but nevertheless they remain realistic.

Synthetic Cubism, while not dependent on the real object in the same sense as *analytical* cubism, returns to the object by a process of concretion: the object emerges from the canvas like

the image of a lantern-slide in the process of focusing. But the focus, when precise, reveals, not an illusory image of some familiar object (for example, a guitar), but a different order of reality with distinct values, only related to the object by suggestion or association. Poetry emerges from the forms; a species of nostalgia is created, as essence is distilled. But what the process involved, and what Gris could never wholly reconcile him to, was a certain degree of abstraction. *'I never seem to be able to find any room in my pictures for that sensitive, sensuous side that I feel ought to be there'*, he wrote in 1915, and that remained true to the end. It produced in his work that inquietude or Angst which gives some justification to the description of Gris as a tragic figure. The truth is that the way to 'purity', in art as in any other spiritual exercise, demands not merely a renunciation of the grosser sensations associated with 'a too brutal and descriptive reality', but also a progressive refinement of sensuousness itself. Gris died in the middle of his career, and Picasso and Braque found the method of cubism too strict for their revolutionary aims. But cubism had contained within itself the seeds of a far stricter discipline, of which there were two aspects or divisions. Analytical cubism, by reducing the natural appearance of objects to a structure of plane surfaces, easily suggested a further stage in which the plane surfaces were divorced from any dependence on the essence (essential Nature) of the object, and became an end in themselves. That is to say, the forms arrived at by the analysis of the structure, say, of pears on a dish on a table, were abstracted and realized or appreciated as geometrical forms with their own proportions and colours. It became more and more difficult to recognize the objects from which the composition had originated, and finally an object was no longer taken as the source or origin of a composition: the composition was *non-figurative* from its inception, an invention of purely formal relationships. This *non-figurative cubism* had nothing in common with either *analytical* or *synthetic* cubism, and has been strongly repudiated by Picasso, for example, who

maintains that all plastic art must necessarily proceed from a sensuous awareness of the natural world.

But *non-figurative cubism*—no longer calling itself *cubism*, but rather non-objective, or *non-figurative art*, more popularly *abstract art*, has had an extraordinary expansion, not only in Europe, but even in the United States, where abstract artists have proliferated in a manner which requires some explanation. This non-figurative offspring of cubism easily degenerates into a very precise and precious academicism. To balance forms, calculate proportions and harmonize colours can be an intellectual exercise rather than an act of creative imagination, and it is certainly, on this calculating intellectual level, no longer an activity which can be called revolutionary. It can be called other names—'*escapist*', for example, for it can be produced in an ivory tower. A more insidious danger is a tendency towards a merely decorative function, and this type of cubism has, indeed, been exploited by industry, and '**cubist**' **wall-papers**, '**cubist**' **linoleum**, '**cubist**' **lamp-shades** and '**cubist**' **electric fittings** became a bourgeois fashion and seem to have taken a permanent hold on certain markets—for the very good reason, perhaps, that geometrical designs are easier to produce by machinery than naturalistic motives.

However, in spite of all this vulgarization and academic fixation of abstract art, there existed a progressive front which cannot be so easily dismissed. It is found in its purest and most revolutionary form in the paintings of *Ben Nicholson*. In Nicholson's work there has never been any question of academic fixation: he had advanced from *experiment* to experiment, always maintaining the vitality and naivety of an extremely sensitive artist, and avoiding any temptation to be satisfied with a purely decorative function. Certain forms have a universal significance—they 'echo', as we might say, the basic structural forms of the physical universe, the 'harmony of the spheres'. Ben Nicholson's *intuitions of form* go far beyond any decorative arrangement of shapes and colours, and being intuitive they have nothing in common with the academic

compositions of even such a considerable artist as Kandinsky. Kandinsky, for whose career and work was not as pure as an abstract artist as Ben Nicholson: he used his abstract forms to illustrate subjective themes. Behind his compositions there was always an 'idea'—perhaps a philosophical idea or a musical idea—for which he tried to find the plastic equivalent. In Nicholson's case, as in the case of another pure abstractionist to whom Nicholson has always been allied, to whom, indeed, he would acknowledge a considerable debt, Piet Mondrian, there is no precedent idea. The idea is the form, the form the idea. The composition is conceived, *ab initio*, in plastic terms. It cannot be translated into any other language, and is not itself a translation from any other language.

This front of *pure abstraction*—of, we might also say, the concrete harmony of universal forms—has historical contacts and intimate relationships with another form of abstract art which we call constructivism. *Constructivism* is actually of independent origin, it developed from the movement known as *Suprematism* which was founded in Moscow in the year 1913, and architects and engineers had as much to do with its formulation as studio painters or sculptors. In 1920 as a result of a fierce debate involving the principles of Marxism, dialectical materialism, socialist realism, and I know not what else, a group under the leadership of *Gabo* and his brother *Antoine Pevsner* seceded from the supremacist movement and established the constructivist movement. The price of their integrity was political exile, and it was in Germany (in Berlin and later at the Bauhaus in Dessau), in Paris (where Pevsner settled), and in London (where Gabo eventually came), that *constructivism* was developed as a revolutionary movement in the arts. The theoretical background of the movement is to a large extent identical with that of the abstractionists, but constructivism has always been in revolt against the whole conception of studio art, of the cabinet picture, the petty bourgeois longing for a nice painting to hang over the fireplace. *Constructivism* as its name indicates is closely allied to

engineering and it seems to establish a non-figurative art which makes use of specifically contemporary materials—steel, plastics, aluminium—and which uses technical methods of construction. What we therefore get, in a typical construction of *Gabo* or *Pevsner* is something which breaks away completely from the whole tradition of European academic art, with its canvases and gilt frames: we get a work of art which is more at home in a factory or on an airport than in an art gallery or a gentleman's residence. We get something so completely revolutionary that it requires a considerable readjustment of our faculties of perception to accept it as art at all. But none the less these constructions of *Gabo* and *Pevsner*, when we analyse them, are found to be as fundamentally aesthetic as the Parthenon. That is to say, in harmony and proportion they conform to the same fundamental universal laws as the art of the past. Their uniqueness, their revolutionary significance, lies in the extension which they exact in the perception and sensuous apprehension of these concrete physical phenomena.

Between the First *Surrealist Manifesto* (*French word Surrealisme*), of 1924 and the latest manifestation of super realist activity, which was the Paris Exhibition of July 1947, the personnel of the movement suffered many changes, but one factor has remained permanent—the intellectual inspiration and integrity of *Andre Breton*. *Breton* has an analytical intelligence of the same order as *Leonardo's*—a curiosity of universal range which seeks the power which knowledge alone can give. His research has been directed in particular to the mystery of the human personality or psyche, and has inevitably led to an association with the revolutionary technique of psychological research which we owe to *Freud*.

Applying *Freudian* methods to the problems of artistic creation, *Breton* evolved a theory and indeed a practice of aesthetic automatism which is the essential feature of *surrealisme*.

The traditional canons of classical aesthetics are abandoned—harmony, proportion, rhythm are treated as at

best incidental features of fundamental psychic manifestations, and as features which are by no means essential to the creation of a work of art. The work of art, it is said, derives its power from the unconscious—more particularly from that deepest layer of the unconscious which the Freudians call the Id. Art, therefore, whether in the form of poetry or painting, even architecture, is potent and aesthetically effective (the Surrealists do not claim to be pleasing) to the extent that it projects significant symbols from the Unconscious. Latterly it has been recognized that the proliferation of discrete or unconnected symbols is not fully effective—it is, indeed, merely confusing. For this reason there has been an increasing emphasis on the organization of symbols into effective patterns or myths. The object of surrealisme (and of superrealism in general) might now be described as the creation of a new mythology.

I believe that Art, in the fundamentally revolutionary sense which I have defined always involves an original act of creation—the invention of an objective reality which previously had no existence. The projection of a symbol or image from the unconscious is not an act of creation in that sense: it is merely the transfer of an existing object from one sphere to another—from the mental sphere, for example, to the verbal or plastic sphere. The essential function of art is revealed in a coordination of images (whether unconscious or perceptual does not matter) into an effective pattern. The art is in the pattern, which is a personal intuition of the artist, and not in the imagery. Imagery can be released by hypnosis, by intoxication, and in dreams: but it does not constitute aesthetic expression, or art, until it has been given expressive form. Myths have usually been evolved in the collective unconscious of peoples, and only slowly precipitated in the form of narratives. It is only when such narratives are shaped into epic poetry that they become works of art. I do not believe that a myth can be synthetically created out of symbols automatically projected

from the unconscious of a few individuals associated in a movement like surrealism

I will not go so far as to say that this particular phase of super-realism has reached a dead end: artists such as *Breton*, *Max Ernst*, *Tanguy*, *Miro*, *Matta* and *Lam* are full of resource, and often they are artists in spite of their theories. *Miro*, for example, has never been a doctrinaire surrealist and his paintings risk being accepted for their beauty rather than for their symbolic significance. I would say the same of *Matta* and *Wilfredo Lam*, in whose work a free revolutionary energy is always manifest.

The theory of psycho-analysis—in its Jungian rather than its Freudian elaboration—has revealed the presence in the psyche not only of significant symbols of a figurative kind, but also of more abstract archetypal forms. *Jung* has shown, for example, how throughout history the unconscious has repeatedly expressed itself in a formal pattern which he calls the *mandala*, a more or less complicated design divided into quadripartite sections. Other forms and shapes are biologically significant—the phallus, for example. But the world is, as it were, haunted by significant forms. Our attention is held by the contour of a particular hill, by the shape of a rock or a tree-stump or a pebble we pick up on the beach. These shapes appeal to us, not because of any superficial beauty, any sensuous texture or colour, but because they are archetypal. That is to say, they are the forms which matter assumes under the operation of physical laws. When these forms are mathematically regular, as in the convolutions of a shell or the structure of a quartz crystal, we can easily account for their appeal under the laws of proportion and harmony. But most of these shapes are more complex and irregular, and we are not consciously aware of the processes which have determined their outline or mass. The beauty of a leaf, a flower or a seed is obvious: the beauty of a bone, a fungus, or even of the solution of a mathematical problem is not so obvious. But the appeal of the unknown is often stronger than the appeal of the known: it

is strong because it is mysterious, because it has not been dissected and analysed. We invest such forms with our own feelings, of sympathy or of fear. This possibility of identity with an inanimate object is the basis of primitive *animism*.

It is in this direction that one phase of European art has continued to advance during recent years. Two artists in particular have explored this super real territory, this world of *animistic forms*—*Picasso* in painting and *Henry Moore* in sculpture. It has a more consistent direction than the work of other artists exploring this territory. Its consistency is perhaps due to certain limitations—an obsession, for example, with female forms, with the symbolic forms of fertility and gestation. But such limitations are often characteristics of the major artist. ‘*The life of art lies in the transformation of forms*’, as a French philosopher of art has said. Moore has shown in his war sketches, in his drawings of coal miners, and in his *Madonna and Child*, that he can, if necessary, depart from his central theme. But in doing so he still expresses himself with a formal simplicity which derives its significance from a primitive or animistic quality of the forms themselves.

Finally, I come to the Expressionist movement, which has been the typical art movement during these years in Scandinavia, Germany and Austria, and has hitherto left Western Europe untouched. The original source of the modern expressionist movement is undoubtedly *Van Gogh*, a *Dutchman*, but it gained general significance with the work of *Edvard Munch*, a Norwegian. Its exponents, in the period we are now considering, have been Germans like *Max Beckmann*, *Otto Dix* and *George Grosz*; Belgians like *De Smet*, *Permeke* and *Fritz van den Berglie*, and, lastly but not least, a Czech like *Oskar Kokoschka*. Rouault, in his independent way, belongs to this movement, and so does an Eastern European Jew like *Chagall*. But essentially the movement has geographic roots: it is the art of Northern Europe, and the typical work of artists of the past, like *Mathias Grunewald* and *Jerome Bosch*, is fundamentally expressionist.

Expressionism, briefly, may be defined as a form of art that gives primacy to the artist's emotional reactions to experience. The artist tries to depict, not the objective reality of the world, but the subjective reality of the feelings which objects and events arouse in his psyche, or self. It is an art that cares very little for conventional notions of beauty; it can be impressively tragic, and sometimes excessively neurotic or sentimental. But it is never merely pretty, never intellectually sterile.

During the period we are considering something like an *'iron curtain'* has been drawn between the expressionist art of Northern Europe and the movements concentrated in Paris. Now, partly as a result of the dispersion caused by Nazism and the war, expressionist influences have been spreading. *Kokoschka* has been in England, *Beckmann* and *Chagall* in the United States, and almost every country has had its refugee expressionist painters. Independently of these direct influences, I think that northern countries, cut off from the propaganda of Paris, have been discovering the congeniality of expressionism—they suddenly recognize in it their natural mode of expression, their pictorial language, Whatever the reason, there is certainly a strong expressionist element in the work of the younger school of painters in Great Britain—and significantly, the most energetic members of this group come from the north—from Scotland. I am referring to *Robert Colquhoun* and *Robert MacBryde*. But an expressionist element will be found in the work of many other young British painters today, and in France we find a similar development represented in the work of *Tailleux*, *Bercot* and *Dubuffet*.

That concludes my survey of the art scenario in Europe. Perhaps the activity of some of the younger painters goes some way to soften the extreme contrast between the two decades, 1909-18 and 1939-48. But though I personally find much that is stimulating and fresh, not only in the recent work of artists of the older generation such as Picasso and Leger, but also in the work of new and comparatively unknown artists like Colquhoun and MacBryde, Butler and Paolozzi, nevertheless, in

historical perspective, there can be no doubt where revolutionary energy has been most manifest. The work of the younger men is still but the prolonged reverberations of the explosions of thirty or forty years ago. The general effect is a diminuendo.

Art is never transfixed, never stagnant. It is a fountain rising and falling under the varying pressure of social conditions, blown into an infinite sequence of forms by the winds of destiny.

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