

CONCENTRATION RESEARCH PAPER

ART AND FUNCTION

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Art has played many roles in the course of civilization. It is the esthetic visual form of human activity. For purposes of simplification I have broken down the functions of art into broad categories of which there can be few clear cut distinctions:

1. From a historical reference art functions as a record of experiences of other people in other times, revealing their activities and ways of thinking.

2. Art can bring to light new ideas and revelations otherwise obscured much the way books reveal new thoughts.

3. Art functions as a personal form of expression.

4. Art and society have a special relationship.

- a. The historical role of art and society.

- b. Cultural synthesis through universal appeal.

- c. Art as an influence in social change.

5. Brief notation is also included as to the function of the artist since it is difficult to talk of art's function without recalling the artist's function as well.

The study of art also offers an intellectual experience by analyzing its components and discovering compositional elements, how they relate, its physical construction, style, balance, etc. Not only does this provide deeper understanding, but yields a form of stimulation and pleasure as an artist's thinking is explored. However, as important as this may be, I will not go into any depth concerning this matter but rather attempt to explore the above mentioned functions.

1. Art as a historical record

By studying the art of past civilizations, we become acquainted with their physical and psychological experiences, their philosophies and aspirations. Art is produced by humans for others, therefore one can learn a great deal about how different races and cultures operated, how they thought and felt.¹

From the wall and ceiling paintings of prehistoric people such as the cave paintings in Lascaux, Southern France and Northern Spain, we can deduce certain characteristics of their culture. Pictorialization is a common human practice. From our knowledge of past civilizations we are able to form judgments as to the meanings of the pictures. Much has been learned about the civilizations of the Egyptians, Greeks, and ancient Crete, for instance, through their works of art. By studying an array of these works we can arrive at a general knowledge of how life might have been and are then able to make elaborate deductions.

In this way, one becomes more receptive to the ideas of others as an understanding takes place of the various cultural backgrounds, social and religious systems. A study of art can promote a tolerance of ideas and dispel prejudices through attempting to understand an artist's intentions and motivations of the past as well as the present.

However, the purpose for which an art work was intended may no longer hold true over an extended period of time. The further removed from the present the more likely this is to happen. For example, if we consider Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa," it is found that the purpose

¹Bernard S. Myers, Understanding the Arts, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 65.

for which it was intended was to protest the abandonment of a group of sailors by their officers after the wreck of the Medusa, a French naval ship, off the coast of Africa. At the time, it was very controversial, but now it is accepted as a work of art.

2. Art as a display of new ideas

Art can function as a vehicle in bringing to light new ideas and ways of seeing otherwise obscured. Each work of art presents an aspect of being, a particular focus, a certain phenomenon to be observed, a philosophical point of view, but some works show an entirely new idea. In Mondrian's "Composition," for example, he attempted to paint the concept of pure "reality" by creating balance through unequal elements of color, line and space. Picasso succeeded in combining the real and that which is drawn or painted in his technique later known as collage. In his "Still Life with Chair Caning," for example, a real piece of caning is combined on a surface with paint, and yet it fails to lose its original identity. Motion was first introduced on a two-dimensional surface by Duchamp with his famous painting, "Nude Descending a Staircase." Often revolutionary ideas such as these spur movements that last years. Cubism, for example, began with the works of Braque and Picasso about 1910, the effects of which can still be felt today.

Whether dealing with representational forms of traditional art or nonrepresentational arrangements of much contemporary art, there is always the awareness of the work as an agent in the creation of a new and more exciting pictorial space. Often displayed are strong and unveiled feelings about something. The very essence of an advanced

culture is a kind of perception in intuitive knowing that transcends academic technique and rules.²

3. Art as a personal form of expression

From its beginning, visual art has played a role in the exchange of information. Although artists continue to create works which display an accurate depiction of that which is real, photo journalism has now largely supplanted the artist as recorder of events. These works continue to hold a fascination for the viewer perhaps because of the skill and successful imitation of appearances. However, deeper levels of meaning between artist and observer perhaps take place with works of a more emotional, less representational nature.

Some artists work only for compositional elements and believe in form alone as the ultimate possible expression in art. Some look on their art as therapy. Others manipulate materials. Those who work from experience, either inward or outward, deal with emotion and feeling.³ Within this latter framework art functions as a personal expression for the artist although it does not necessarily deal exclusively with the private emotions and details of the artist's intimate life. The uniquely personal comments the artist may make about common human situations of love, death, loneliness, and hope save it from being mundane. In some works it is obvious that they reveal a simplistic meaning while others stand as a vehicle for the artist's personal vision and sensitivity. For example, in Marc Chagall's "Birthday" their marriage is observed as rituals of gift giving and a feeling that love transcends romance.

²Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content, (Vintage Books, New York, 1957), pp. 41-51.

³Shahn, p. 52.

Other works are devoted to increasing pleasure through the esthetic observations of colors and shapes employing the expanding use of one's perceptual capabilities. George Braque created paintings for their pure visual pleasure. He delights us with cubist concepts of rearranging planes of objects, distorting perspective and presenting translucency of objects. He has created a picture in and for itself not one "of" something. This can clearly be observed in "The Round Table."

Other artists create not to express beauty or pleasing arrangements but to shock, confront, or otherwise celebrate mere excitement and energy. This can be said of the surrealists like Salvador Dali, or the abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollack and Franz Kline, as well as the pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Worhol.

4. Art and Society

This wide choice and variety of expression can be viewed as a reflection of society. We have become a society of specialization. Every field is saturated with experts who have a wealth of knowledge and expertise in small segmented areas and essentially have lost touch with a general philosophy, encompassing various disciplines, within which to discuss, argue and exchange ideas similar to the Bauhaus in Europe after World War I. The day of the generalist has disappeared with our advanced technology, requiring specialized fields of knowledge. A narrow, tunnel vision many times seems apparent, limiting thinking processes to one's own special field to the exclusion of a broader exchange of ideas and philosophies. Most of the great art movements of the past were of an intellectual base and often began simultaneously

with radical attitudes expressed in literature and philosophy. The art being produced today many times has a fragmentary feeling, mirroring the attitude of narrow specialization, be it from a personal or technical base of expression.

Economics have also contributed to the factor of specialization by promoting thinking in pragmatic terms. The urgent need for standing out and finding "one's identity" by self affirmation in an overpopulated, unsupportive atmosphere promotes this specialization and narrowing vision as well. Emphasis is on the individual rather than on a shared basis, limiting the possibilities for a cohesive movement in any field.

a. The historical role of art and society

In the past, art played a very different role in relationship to society. European art between 1500 and 1900 served the interests of the ruling classes, those of wealth. The possession of oil paintings was very closely connected with one's status. Oil paintings were often simple demonstrations of what money could buy. Merchandise became the actual subject matter. Their purpose was not to transport their observer-owner into a new experience, but to add to experiences already possessed, contributing to one's wealth. Works of this sort can be seen in Thomas Gainsborough and the American James Peale. Works of art celebrated wealth which was a fixed social symbol. As the market made more demands, the artist became concerned about finishing a commission or selling a painting rather than expressing meaningful values. This phenomenon has been increasing since the 17th century. The rise of the open art market and the period of oil painting production seem to correspond. It is in this contradiction between art and

market that explanations may be found for the difference between the exceptional work and the average.⁴

Later oil paintings celebrated a new kind of wealth, the supreme buying power of money. Paintings thus had to demonstrate the desirability of what money could buy and thus reward the owner. This in fact is still seen today. The way in which the owner sees the painting often confirms his or her own view of himself or herself.⁵

The tradition of painting has been altered the most radically perhaps with the Fauvist movement in Europe in 1905, in which artists rebelled against all past traditions. Functions changed. Artists now began to look to themselves to define art and were not so concerned about the market place and the masses. They began to dictate and reshape the picture plane in order to suit their needs. Objective reality, movement, abstraction, etc., now became the stage for the expression of the individual that encompasses sensitizing aspects in communication.

At about the same time, 1908, there was a collective attempt to bring art to the masses in America around the turn of the century. "The Eight" were a group of artists who denounced the work of the academies in order to open new avenues for everyone to appreciate life as it was, true to reality. A new definition and thus new functions of the meaning of art began to take shape in America.

⁴John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (Penguin Books, New York and the British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1972), p. 110.

⁵Berger, pp. 96-110.

b. The universality of art and society

Within the functions of art there exists a universal appeal. Uniting the subjective and the objective into a single impression can produce a universality which affirms unique qualities. An identification takes place when one experiences that which illuminates one's private and personal world when observing a work of art. Going beyond cultures and countries, it can provide a link to all humankind. A unique opportunity is available to explore issues of great current movements and attitudes involving personal philosophy and ethics as they affect our relations with one another. A projection of certain universal truth, intangible, intuitive factors are conveyed and felt.

Cultural synthesis can theoretically take place in a world of growing neurosis, possibilities of nuclear holocaust, and a sense of helplessness. Art has the possibilities of restoring confidence by revitalizing our creative powers. ". . . the character of a society is largely shaped and unified by its great creative works, that a society is molded upon its epics, and that it imagines in terms of its creative things - its cathedrals, its works of art, its musical treasures, its literary and philosophic works. One might say that a public may be so unified because the highly personal experience is held in common by the many individual members of the public."⁶

The spiritual state of the age is expressed in the best representatives of the arts. Artistic excellence, I suspect, develops from an awareness of the social, political and personal realm in which we exist.

⁶Shahn, p. 45.

The basis of art is derived from a framework based on the historical period in which one lives as well as on social and spiritual attitudes of a culture at the time.

c. Art as an instrument of social change

"The unconscious but direct influence of art represents a means of persuasion for conditioning people to a new society either by its projective or satiric-destructive means."⁷ Artists, as the most intuitive and responsive people in society can hardly be said not to have a direct influence on social change. The most uncensored area of productive society should have a great deal to say about social attitudes, changes and states of being. In what other area of our product-oriented society are ideas and attitudes so freely expressed without fear of repression.

Mexico produced some powerful artists like Jose Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros, whose works evoke sympathy for the oppressed. Their art is specifically designed to inculcate certain ideals in the minds of people. Kathe Kollowitz and Francisco Goya are among those who also fall into the social realm of artistic functions. Picasso's "Guernica" painted in 1937 clearly evokes agony and sympathy for the sufferers of the Spanish Civil War. Other social realists such as Jack Levine and Ben Shahn have remained as highly regarded and politically exciting even though their work often has narrative and illustrative qualities.

Artists can be an active force in the solution to societal problems just as social revolutionaries can through their political action. Art is

⁷Richard Kostelanetz, Esthetics Contemporary, (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, 1978), p. 72.

a part of a civilization and cannot be separated out as if immune or existing within a vacuum. The conscious and subconscious mind may absorb social ideas which can be expressed in a desired media. "No society can exist without expressing its ideas, and no culture and no ethics can survive without participation of the artist who cannot be bribed."⁸ Genuine free expression is essential for a healthy society.

Art can be classified as having a specific social function by the response it evokes from various audiences. The individual responds to this art with the awareness that he or she is a member of a group which is in turn urged to act by the works of art he or she is observing. Art performs social functions when 1) it intends to influence collective behavior, 2) it is primarily seen or used in public situations, and 3) it expresses social experiences as opposed to that of the individual or personal.⁹

Public art very clearly performs a social function, while other works less clearly reveal social intent or effect. Works can function in terms of social description, praise and celebration, anger and protest, satire and ridicule. In other words, art can influence the behavior of people in groups, affecting the way they think or feel and sometimes the way they act. Advertising is a common illustration of this phenomenon but it is questionable in terms of esthetic value.

Often, art which influences social behavior is not considered art and is degraded as impure or propaganda. Given certain assumptions about the "appropriate" functions of art, this is true. The appropriate

⁸Kostelanetz, p. 73.

⁹Kostelanetz, p. 72.

social role of art is likely to be debated for a long time. Nevertheless, many artists do seek to influence, therefore, its social function cannot be ignored. It can also be said that artistic excellence should in no way be judged by any function it may perform.

Interested in recording and communicating his or her vision, the artist becomes the measurement of trends or movements pertaining to the future or the dynamics of the present. Perhaps the secured existence of an uncompromising and incorruptible artist is of vital importance to society because of the moral responsibility to record and interpret. It is a sad situation when a society is unsupportive of its productive members unless their work is lucrative in an economic or investment sense.

5. Function of the artist

There is an aspect to art that perhaps leads to the most direct result of communicating feelings, and that deals with the artist himself/herself. The artist must function and act as two people, producer and critic, while he or she creates. The producer is excited by a new idea while the inner critic dictates what can and cannot be done. These two aspects of the artist keep the image of a work and its meaning as a cohesive unit. The inner critic can be a ruthless destroyer who is refined and honed by an experienced and very personal taste. So, too, the educated observer reaps the benefits of this refined critic. A function of the artist then should be to constantly reexamine and tear apart or reassemble what one thinks in the light of changing attitudes and new discoveries.

Artists have a formative, ideological function. They cannot escape the task of interpreting ideas and concepts, since they are forever sharpening their senses of sight, mind and feelings. "In the midst of vast social controversies he [or she] cannot escape this task. He [or she] has to take sides and proclaim his [or her] stand; indeed the artist has a formative ideological function, otherwise his [or her] work is only an exercise of skill in composition."⁹ The content of art is not different from the verbalizations of society. It is more or less subconsciously produced, complimenting creative problems in other fields.

In conclusion, art and function are constantly being reshaped as changes occur in values, attitudes and thinking processes. At the present time, artists have been given the freedom to move out of the narrow constricting attitudes of the past into ever expanding realms. From the art movements of the last two centuries, no longer is the content of art bound by restricting definitions. The pursuit of art continues to be an intellectual activity increasing the rich fabric of life. As a reflection of our existence, art can mirror as well as be an intrinsic part of society. It can be said that artists themselves, ever refining their sensitivities, are constantly attuned to the complexities of life and inherently interpret and shape attitudes, exchange and communicate that which is felt, a necessary human activity.

This activity we call art seems to be inherent in every civilization, regardless of any set standard. Its purpose, as the communication of feelings, seems to be an important element in human activity. It has properties that sensitize us to the human condition. It attempts to produce a balance of social, intellectual and emotional existence, a display of attitudes, opinions, fears, and hopes.

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