

## ART IN MODERN SOCIETY

LLOYD GOODRICH \*

THE POSITION OF creative art in modern society is in many ways a difficult one. This difficulty is shared to some extent by most creative activities—literature, music, architecture, even the theatre—but painting and sculpture have difficulties peculiar to themselves. Revolutionary changes have taken place in art in the last fifty years—changes which the public does not yet comprehend. Controversies over modern art are in the news continually. And yet there is extraordinary creative activity all around us, today, in our own country; and our artists have things of inestimable value to contribute to our society. Today I want to discuss some aspects of this complex question of the relation of modern art to modern society.

The relation between art and society in a modern democracy dates back, in its essentials, to the French Revolution. Until the Revolution, art was still largely the visual embodiment of the concepts of church, royalty and aristocracy. The Revolution released new freedoms and energies in art as in every other field. But with the reaction which followed the Revolution, and the transfer of power to the bourgeoisie, came a division between the culture of the new ruling class, and the new forces in art. The old regime had represented ancient faiths and allegiances, and had furnished art with great themes and traditions, even though much of their vitality had been lost. But the bourgeoisie represented no such long cultural traditions. Their culture—secular, concerned with material power and wealth, and narrowly moralistic—had little in common with the new creative energies in art, the new feeling for humanity, the new sense of reality, the new emotional intensity, and the new belief in the individual.

Bourgeois culture dominated official art policies throughout the

\* Associate Director, Whitney Museum of American Art. This paper was originally given in a different form as part of a symposium on "The Contemporary Scene," on March 28-30, 1952, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is now publishing the complete symposium. In its present form it was delivered by the writer before a conference of the Institute of Delaware History and Culture on March 27, 1954.

nineteenth century. In most European nations the state controlled the official art world. Almost without exception, official recognition was given only to conservative art, and the most creative artists were rejected from exhibitions, refused membership in societies, and denied commissions and awards, and purchases by museums. Thus came a division in the art world such as had never existed to the same extent: there was an official art, which today is completely outmoded, and an independent art, which included almost all the artists who now seem important. This independent art had only a small audience; and its continuing existence was a testimony both to its vitality and to the new individual freedom permitted by modern society.

The growing democracy of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the shift of power to wider proportions of the people, have brought another element into the relation of art and society—the general public. Under the old regime the people had respected and enjoyed art as the visual expression of church and state; but since the great popular movement of cathedral-building in the Middle Ages, they had played little part in its direct support or control. But with higher living standards, increasing leisure, and broader education, the general public and its opinions have become a new factor in the art world.

At the same time, science and technology have produced new mass forms of visual art—photography, the movies, television, popular illustration. The camera has come into direct competition with the artist. In all previous ages, pictures of any kind were made by artists. Artists were the pictorial preachers, historians, and storytellers for society; and they also monopolized the many utilitarian forms of picture-making. But within the last hundred years, these social functions have been largely taken over by photography. Photo-mechanical reproduction, the popular press, and the new art of advertising have spread reproduced pictures to every newsstand and living-room table. Advertising has multiplied posters and billboards, and with the aid of electricity has made the main streets of our cities a nightly spectacle of images in colored lights. Photography in the form of movies and television has created a visual art for the people such as never existed before. In the ability to tell a story there can be no comparison between painting and the moving picture. The movies have everything—verisimilitude, motion, sound, drama, and a shining screen. How

can poor limited painting compete with this—static, silent, existing in only one place, handmade, and without benefit of electric light? Never in history have pictures and images been so omnipresent and inescapable. Here are mass forms of visual art which quantitatively dwarf the fine arts. Their effect on public taste is a thousandfold that of all our museums, galleries, and art schools together. Not that these new art-forms are inherently bad; the best in films, photography and illustration is as much art as painting and sculpture. But the vast mass of it, while having its own values as entertainment, humor, romance, and technical skill, has as little permanent value as most of the millions of words that are being written and printed every day.

All of this has brought fundamental changes in the social function of art. Art is no longer the pictorial embodiment of church and state, or the chief visual instructor and entertainer of the people. The audience for the fine arts is only a fraction of the public that goes to the movies, watches television, and reads the comic strips. The majority of the general public is more or less indifferent to the fine arts—not just to modern art, but also to that of the past—and indeed to the best contemporary creation in literature, music, and all the arts. I am not suggesting that this portends the decline of civilization. Critics of the contemporary artist often say that as compared to his predecessors of the past he has alienated the public. This ignores the historical facts that the general public is a new factor in the art world, that modern social conditions have created a public with more money, leisure, and demands for entertainment than ever before, and new forms of popular art to satisfy those demands; and that all this has little to do with the values of the fine arts. I wonder if Michelangelo's public would not have flocked in greater numbers to a movie than to the Sistine Chapel. The audience for the fine arts today may be small compared to the great public, but there is no question that it is larger than at any time in modern history, and constantly growing, as is proved by attendance at museums and galleries, by enrollment in art schools and college art departments, and by the amount of space given to art in the popular press. This audience is important out of all proportion to its size. It supports artistic creation both financially and spiritually. It influences the wider public, and its judgments are often those of the future. As patron of living art it has taken the place of church, aristocracy, and state.

In most societies of the past, art was an expression of the dominant ideas and beliefs of society, whether a tribe, a city, a nation, or the whole of Christendom. Even with the rise of individualism in the Renaissance, art still remained an embodiment of common beliefs. But modern society presents no such unity of faith. There is no longer any such universally accepted system of belief as that of Catholic Christianity, which furnished the dominant themes to art for over a thousand years. Science has undermined old faiths without replacing them. Political democracy has replaced unity imposed from above by a balance of opposing classes and parties. Freedom of thought and expression have given new importance to the individual. Art in a modern democracy is less an expression of common ideologies than of personal ideas and emotions, intended for various audiences. Religion in the broadest sense is still an important element in art, but less in the form of institutionalized religion than of the individual's relation to the ultimate mysteries.

The beliefs of Christianity, as of almost all historic religions, were incarnated in human form; and their anthropomorphism was perfectly adapted for pictorial representation. When the medieval public looked at a Virgin and Child, they were seeing a familiar symbol, an incarnation of faith, and only secondarily a work of art. But the secular beliefs of the modern world—ethics, democracy, the belief in science, and in human perfectibility—are more abstract and do not offer any such commonly accepted pictorial symbols. Today there is no image that has the universal meaning which the Virgin had for the people of the Middle Ages. And the gap between our secular beliefs and their visual symbolizing widens as the fields of knowledge expand and grow more complex.

The first response to these modern conditions in the mid-nineteenth century was naturalism, which coincided with the development of the physical sciences, of materialistic philosophy, and of the materialistic interpretation of history. The most vital artists turned away not only from orthodox religion, but from history, classical mythology, or any kind of so-called "literary" subject-matter, and concentrated on the contemporary world. In the words of Courbet: "Our grandiose painting is a contradiction of our social conditions, our church painting of the spirit of the age. It is an absurdity for painters to trot out subjects in which they have no real interest and which are appropriate to a time and place remote from our



own. It is far better to paint railway stations, engine houses, mines, and factories. These are the saints and miracles of the nineteenth century." For the two generations following Courbet, that of the impressionists and post-impressionists, and even that of the fauves and cubists, the chief starting point was the contemporary world, no matter how far they might depart from it. In content cubism was limited chiefly to the figure and still-life and the concrete objects of daily life. From Courbet through cubism, the most vital artists were interested less in expressing ideas than in developing a new visual language.

Not until well into the twentieth century did ideological and imaginative elements become once more a vital part of the content of art. Their reappearance paralleled the superseding of materialistic philosophy, the exploration of the unconscious mind, and scientific reappraisal of the historic religions and legends of mankind. The tremendous political and social upheavals of the twentieth century, shattering the relatively secure civilization of the late nineteenth century, led artists once more to express what they thought about the world and society.

Since the rise of industrialism, capitalism, and the modern state, the most creative artists have seldom been ideological champions of the governing forces of their times, as most of their predecessors up to the French Revolution had been. In the great broad libertarian trend since the Enlightenment, artists have usually been found on the side of individualism, of political and social liberalism, of freedom of thought, expression, and action, rather than on the side of power and wealth. The vast concentration of power represented by industrialism and capitalism has presented them with no such moving beliefs and ideas, nor called forth such allegiance, as the spiritual and temporal forces of the past. Except for advertising and commercial artists, they have been less interested in celebrating industry and commerce than in human and democratic values. Even when they have reacted against democracy it has been more often toward an aristocracy of mind and taste than of material power—or toward extreme individualism. Socialism in its early utopian and idealistic phases found many adherents among artists. The huge catastrophe of two world wars and the social upheavals attending them, brought home to artists, as to everyone else, the fact that in the world of today, social and political forces directly affect the lives of all of us. Modern warfare, with its

increasing mass involvement, its mechanization, its cumulating horror, is something quite different from the old heroic hand-to-hand combat which had furnished themes for some of the greatest art of the past, and most war art of our time which is not journalistic reporting is strongly anti-militarist.

The above applies to art in the democracies. In totalitarian countries the picture is reversed. In Soviet Russia, for a few years after the Revolution, there was freedom of artistic expression, which produced some of the most original experimental art in Europe. But this early tolerance was soon replaced by increasing subjection of art to the totalitarian state. Marxist theorists evolved the rigid doctrine of "socialistic realism": art must be completely dedicated to the communist cause; it must glorify the party and the state, their heroes and achievements; its style must be understandable to every citizen. Any concern with purely artistic qualities, with form, color, and design in themselves, was suppressed as "bourgeois formalism." The result was an official Soviet art frozen in the mold of the worst official art of the nineteenth century.

The same retrogression took place in Nazi Germany—but more consciously, thoroughly, and devastatingly, for Germany had been one of the chief centers of modern art. Again, the only art permitted was that which glorified the party, the state and the Führer; which expressed the ideals of brute force, physical health, obedience, and mindless optimism; and which could be understood by anybody. All modern art was condemned as "degenerate." The result was an official Nazi art remarkably similar to official Soviet art. In both countries, the most creative artists either were suppressed or escaped to enrich the culture of the free world. And it is noteworthy that in both countries the suppression of artistic freedom was aided and abetted by reactionary artists and art officials.

In the democratic countries, the twentieth century has seen the emergence of a more consciously social art than any since David and the French revolutionary and Napoleonic painters. In our own country, social art took several forms. Partly in reaction against modernism with its international character, there was a surge of nationalism in the 1920's and 1930's. Regionalists like Benton, Wood, and Curry celebrated the affirmative aspects of American life, and especially the old-fashioned virtues of the agricultural Midwest. More drastic realists such as Hopper, Burchfield, and

Marsh pictured the Eastern city and small town with greater penetration and irony.

The depression of the 1930's brought a new consciousness of social and economic ills. The depression led many artists in the democratic countries to see communism as the hope of mankind, and blinded them to its growing authoritarianism and repressiveness. A widespread school of social protest, only part of which was tinged by communism, produced the most powerful criticism of our social system so far in our art. These two schools of social art, the affirmative and the critical, together achieved an exploration and appraisal of American life which made an enormous contribution to our national self-knowledge, parallel to that of writers like Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Dos Passos.

Today the American scene and social protest schools are no longer widespread movements, although they have their vigorous individual exponents. Regionalism with its accompanying chauvinism and isolationism could not survive in the modern world. The reaction against Marxism, the second World War, the cold war, have all been unfavorable to the growth of social protest art. Its wide prevalence in the 1930's has been replaced by the general movement toward abstraction. The social scene still furnishes the content of much contemporary art. But it is no longer the simple affirmation or protest of fifteen years ago; the viewpoints are more personal and diverse, marked by more drastic realism on the one hand and more imaginative fantasy on the other. There is a new sense of the tensions and anxieties of the contemporary world—the horror of the two greatest wars in history, the realization of man's capacity for inhumanity, the continuing conflict between ideologies, the fears for the very existence of civilization, the hope for a future based on humanity and reason. These vast issues are reflected in our art, though often in forms disguised either consciously or unconsciously. They are expressed directly in the realism of artists like Grosz, Shahn, or Evergood, or less directly in the disturbing imagery of some expressionists and surrealists. And indirectly they have much to do with the trend toward abstract art, in which the troubling outer world is disregarded and the artist seeks to build an aesthetic order.

The contemporary artist has been taken to task for his supposed incapacity to deal with the problems of the present-day world. On the one hand he is attacked for the occasional ugliness and violence

of his content and urged to picture more "healthy" and "normal" subjects. This is putting the cart before the horse; the artist did not create the evils of today, and to condemn his picturing them is to impose pollyanna standards. Far from being anti-social, his protest, like most satire, is an inverted idealism, and can be socially valuable. On the other hand, he is blamed for not offering solutions to our problems, and accused of expressing purely "private" emotions, of taking refuge in abstraction, and in general of fiddling while Rome burns. This seems to me a misconception of the artist's role in society. By expressing his own ideas and emotions he makes us more aware of ourselves and of the world; he creates, in form and color, embodiments of order which communicate the highest form of disinterested delight; he contributes to the civilizing processes by which society may some day be transformed. But to expect him to offer solutions to the most complex and tremendous problems that have ever faced humanity, problems which have so far proved beyond the powers of our wisest statesmen, philosophers, scientists, and practical men, is to ask the impossible. The social function of art is not necessarily direct. It need not comment directly on society to be socially valuable. The work of art represents a search for perfection in its kind that is precious not only as satisfying personal tastes but ultimately in a social sense. Like all products of man's higher powers, it can be a pattern of the harmony and reason tragically lacking in our society and our relations person-to-person and nation-to-nation.

One of the chief obstacles to public understanding of contemporary art is the revolutionary change in its basic concept in our time. Fifty years ago pictorial art was generally regarded by the popular mind as imitation of nature. This was of course a limited and false conception of the nature of art. Great art has never been merely representation; even in its most naturalistic tradition, that of Europe since the early Renaissance, beneath representation were the abstract elements of form, design, color harmony—elements which speak as directly to the senses and through the senses to the mind, as music does. This transformation of natural forms into art form, this creation of a formal order transcending external reality, this abstract harmony underlying apparent naturalism, were things of which the masters must have been more or less conscious, though they never formulated them into rationalized systems like those of music or poetry; while the average beholder



remained quite unaware of these abstract elements, though doubtless realizing them unconsciously. Thus we have the paradox of an art whose essential nature was hidden from the popular mind until recent times.

In terms of naturalism, the evolution of European art through the Renaissance was a progressive mastery of the imitation of nature. From Giotto through Rembrandt, painters mastered in turn perspective, anatomy, deep space, light, and atmosphere. But beneath all this in all great painting had been the formal qualities that made it art. By the second half of the nineteenth century, naturalism had been pushed as far as it could go, in an academic illusionistic art devoid of the plastic qualities of the great art of the past. And photography was taking over the utilitarian functions of representation, thus competing with the artist and at the same time liberating him for more creative purposes. Art had to transcend naturalism in order to have any *raison d'être*. Beginning with neo-impressionism and post-impressionism, modern art began to concentrate consciously on creation in imagery, form, and color, using visual reality more and more freely, and sometimes disregarding it altogether. Form, line, color, and texture were no longer merely means of producing an illusion of reality, but a direct physical language. In none of the other arts has there been so revolutionary a change in the concept of its very nature.

While the art public is aware of this change, the general public is not yet; to them art is still a copy of something real. Any deviation from this disturbs them more than in other arts because of the close relation between visual reality and art. The physical world exists to the eye as it does not to the ear; by the very fact of their existence objects have form, color, and position in space; but they do not necessarily produce sound. Hence music is not imitation of nature, and the musician is free to create in the language of sound without disturbing the public idea of what music is. But the external visible world is something in which everyone lives and moves and has his being; and if his concept of art is limited to imitation of it, he is outraged by the liberties taken by modern artists. This wide gap between the artist's concept of the very nature of art, and the popular concept, is one of the chief causes of the public misunderstanding of modern art, and the violence of conflicts over it. Not until the public realizes that art is original creation in free imagery, form, and color, will there be a more

general acceptance of modern art. Here education is needed—explanation of contemporary art to the public in terms it can understand.

This changed concept has profoundly affected all present-day art, not only abstract but naturalistic. Academic art still clings to the nineteenth-century tradition of illusionistic naturalism. But naturalism today has a non-academic, creative side which shares fully in the new concepts of our time. This creative naturalism is conscious of the plastic factors which are the enduring elements in all genuine art, and believes that there need be no more conflict between the attainment of them and the representation of reality than there was in the Renaissance. External nature is after all the primal source of all art, the inexhaustible storehouse of all forms and colors, and the environment which determines all our plastic sensations and ideas. The urge to create images of objective reality is no less strong than it ever was; and I for one doubt if it will ever lessen, in spite of temporary changes of taste. Those champions of abstract art who dismiss naturalism as passé reveal a limited understanding of the complex nature of the work of art, which can exist on several levels simultaneously. Today creative naturalism has lost none of its vitality, and has many exponents, representing a wide variety of subjects, viewpoints, and styles, from realism as meticulous as that of the early Flemish masters to the broadest neo-impressionism. And in all directions it merges into less naturalistic schools; there are myriad degrees of transition between it and less representational styles.

Among the anti-naturalistic tendencies of the last seventy-five years, one of the broadest has been *primitivism*. Primitivism is a revolt against the growing intellectualism, complexity, and mechanization of civilization; and in art specifically, a reaction against the dead technical skill of academic art, a return to the physical and instinctual bases of all enduring art. For prototypes in the past it has gone back successively to the Italian primitives, to archaic Greek art, to African Negro sculpture, to South Pacific and American Indian art, and most recently to that of the caveman—more ancient, universal concepts than those of western naturalism, concepts of art as graphic symbols rather than literal representation. At the same time has come the discovery of primitive elements in contemporary art: folk art, and that of children, of the untaught, and of the insane. Like all revolutions, primitivism has

meant the scrapping of certain civilized values. But it has unquestionably freed art of much that had nothing to do with art, and has brought it back to its physical roots. Today it shows no sign of abatement; indeed, current expressionist abstraction in this country is the most widespread primitivist movement so far.

The discoveries of psychology have played a fundamental part in contemporary art, particularly the exploration of the unconscious mind. Art has always been to some extent fantasy; even the great naturalistic art of Europe was not merely representation of the external world, but the world as passed through man's mind and transformed by it into imagery freed of everything meaningless—the essential reality of the mind's eye. In their fusion of the outer and inner image, the greatest masters represented a balance between the conscious and the unconscious which gave their art depth and universal meaning. In certain extraordinary individuals—Leonardo, Tintoretto, El Greco, Grünewald, Blake, Delacroix, Redon, Ryder—the inner world dominated the outer world.

We all know the richness of imagery which our unconscious minds present to our consciousness in dreams and half-waking states, and we have all marveled at this creative activity, due to no conscious effort on our part, rising freely out of the depths of the unconscious. Such imagery has an affinity to art, being the external world transformed by the mind into symbols of our deepest desires and conflicts. It is the mind's creation of what is essentially art; in his dreams every man is an artist. This rediscovered world of the unconscious, lost in the materialistic naturalism of the nineteenth century, has become an important element of modern art. The artists who draw on it reveal all degrees of relationship to it; some like Dali and Peter Blume represent real objects, figures, and scenes in fantastic combinations, pictured with meticulous naturalism; at the opposite extreme, Klee, Miro, and Gorky use a highly disguised abstract imagery. Like the representation of external reality, that of inner reality ranges all the way from naturalism to semi-abstraction. Here as with external nature, art transforms actuality into its own language, creating plastic symbols rather than literal representation.

Even artists who are not surrealists have been deeply affected by this exploration of unconscious imagery. It has released them from literal naturalism, has re-introduced elements of fantasy and humor, and has opened up the rich storehouse of myth and legend, of

primitive and ancient beliefs, of the collective imagination of mankind—no longer academic classicism but fantasy revitalized by its relation to the living actuality of our own minds. Here are fields offering unknown possibilities for the future. It seems probable that future art will explore the world of the unconscious mind more deeply than it has so far, and achieve new fusions of conscious and unconscious imagery. It may well be that future masters will make our present essays in the unconscious seem primitive. Certainly some of its manifestations so far seem less like authentic products of the unconscious mind than conscious exhibitionism and attempts to shock.

In the last forty years one of the chief trends has been toward *abstraction*, and today it is the dominant tendency among many of the younger generation. But actually *pure* abstraction is in the minority, and much predominantly abstract art retains imagery to some degree. And even relatively pure abstraction has some degree of relation to external reality, the original source of its forms. Abstract art can be divided into several main types. *Organic abstraction* rises out of natural forms, carried to the point where recognizable images cease to exist, yet the forms retain the character of their prototypes in nature. Similarly, *surrealist abstraction* stems from unconscious imagery, and its forms, though no longer specific images, retain the psychological expressiveness of such images. A step beyond this is *expressionist abstraction*, such as the early work of Kandinsky, where the chief aim is the expression of subjective emotion in a style as free from specific references to reality as music. On the other hand, *geometrical abstraction* does not attempt to directly express subjective emotion, but to create an objective order in visual terms. Whatever emotion it contains is inherent in the work as an object embodying conceptions of relation, balance, and harmony. There are interesting parallels between such art and that of a naturalist like Hopper, who similarly aims not at direct expression of emotion but at building objective images of reality which contain the emotion.

The most widespread recent tendency is what has broadly been called amorphous abstraction. Some of its exponents have eliminated not only imagery but also traditional concepts of form, pattern, center of interest, and movement, and have made their art largely one of space filled with light and color and activated by line. Such art is related to ascetic mysticism; disregarding the



troubled outer world, it searches for purification, peace, an aesthetic order transcending the world of phenomena. The prevalence of this style today seems to me linked to the disturbing state of human affairs.

Critics of abstract art often speak of it as meaningless decoration. To my mind this shows a failure to distinguish between specific content, based on specific associations, and general content, parallel to that of music. Much abstract art has some degree of specific content; and even the purest has general content, the expression of emotion, or the building of an ideal of visual perfection. If abstract art is "escape" it is not escape into sentimental idealization of actualities; it deals directly with physical realities and organizes them into plastic creation. In this sense all art can be said to have an element of escape.

The word "humanism" has been invoked in attacking abstract art; critics have said that since most great art of the past has represented humanity, abstract art is therefore anti-humanist. This would appear to identify humanism with the naturalistic representation of human subjects. In this limited sense it is certainly true that much abstract and semi-abstract art is not "humanistic." But this does not mean that it is inhuman. Realistic representation of humanity can be as cold as ice; witness academic art of the nineteenth century—or for that matter, the twentieth. On the other hand, abstract art which expresses emotion in a language akin to music, or seeks the order and harmony which are among the deepest human aspirations, can be profoundly human. It is by its emotional content, not by its representation of human subjects, that the humanist value of art, in the broadest sense, can be measured.

It has also been said that the distortion of the human figure in modern art is anti-humanist. The human figure has been represented throughout the centuries in all kinds of ways, and tremendous liberties taken with it. Consider African Negro, South Pacific and American Indian art; consider totem poles, Egyptian gods with human bodies and animal heads, Assyrian beasts with human faces, the many-armed divinities of Indian art, the elongations of El Greco. To identify "humanism" with the naturalistic representation of the human figure as practised in Europe during a particular historical period, is a limited definition. Unquestionably there is sometimes an element of hatred and sadism in the

distortion of the figure by some modern artists; but by and large, it is more often a free use of the figure for expressiveness and design. Picasso, the most conspicuous exponent of this, is not expressing a negative attitude toward humanity, but a fantastic, inventive play with human attributes, a vital energy, and often an extraordinary humor. Which is more human: Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*, or a Bouguereau nude? Picasso's picture is an expression of sensuous delight in the vitality of the body in all its functions. At the opposite extreme, in *Guernica*, he has distorted the figures to express the extremity of violence and horror; here is humanity at the mercy of the inhuman forces of society—one of the most powerful embodiments of the human predicament in our time.

The creed of abstraction is a logical product of our age, and it has made a great contribution. It has purified art of much that was irrelevant and dead, and has restored it to its basis in the senses. It has discarded art that is nothing more than representation, and has released art from hopeless competition with photography. We know now that the camera can never take the place of the artist in creating art form, and that the instinct to create art form is perennial and cannot die unless civilization dies with it. Nevertheless I question whether *pure* abstraction represents the ultimate goal of artistic evolution, as some of its proponents appear to believe. Pictorial art has always been related in some degree to visual reality. Purely on the formal level, the external world presents such an infinite variety of forms that the artist who shuns the use of them limits his artistic vocabulary. And on a broader level, the question is whether pure abstraction, if it should conceivably become the only mode, could permanently satisfy man's deep desire for an art that will at once express ideas and emotions related to the real world, and embody them in enduring plastic form.

I doubt if there has ever been a period in history when art was more diverse than today. This is due to our extreme eclecticism, our widening knowledge of historic styles, to rapid communication between countries, and to the swift changes of the past fifty years, which have found certain artists in the forefront while others remain relatively unaffected. We have individuals and schools of many different viewpoints, from straight naturalism to pure abstraction, all with their own audiences, and all, to the unprejudiced

mind, of equal validity. Which is the style of the 1950's? It would be a rash critic who would answer categorically.

This lack of unity has been called a weakness. There is no question that the human mind longs for unity, not only in art but in all human affairs; and that the great art of the past which was a group expression gained thereby in stature, strength, and universality. It is natural for us to envy the unity of the past, and to forget that it was the result of a more authoritarian society than ours. The diversity of today is a characteristic of democracy. Unquestionably it has elements of weakness, as our form of democracy itself has; but it is infinitely preferable to the synthetic unity imposed by totalitarianism. Our democratic diversity has in it life and hope for the future, whereas totalitarian unity is death to the creative spirit. That in a civilization as standardized as ours in material ways, where we see the same movies, listen to the same radio programs, and read syndicated news—that in such a civilization there should be such variety of artistic creation and opinion, is one of the hopeful phenomena of democracy. It may well be an age of more and smaller talents, though I believe we lack the perspective to be sure of this. Perhaps the future will see which artists most fully expressed the spirit of our time, and will see a unity of which we are not aware.

Many different artists saying different things to different audiences of different sizes—this is one aspect of democracy. The whole question of the size of the audience is complicated. Certain artists have small audiences not only during their lifetimes but thereafter, yet are no less good. Winslow Homer and Albert Ryder were contemporaries; Homer was popular, Ryder was not, and perhaps never will be. Does this have any real bearing on their relative merit? Artists like El Greco have remained neglected for centuries, until the appearance of an audience which could appreciate them; indeed this is true of whole schools, and the art of entire races and periods. Opinions vary from group to group, from age to age. Judgments of artistic value, in the last analysis, are subjective, and not capable of objective proof as in science. The nearest approach to such proof is professional opinion and informed lay opinion, arrived at over long periods of time. Such opinion ultimately sets general standards which influence the taste of a large part of society. But one thing we can be sure of: judgments based on the size of an audience are highly misleading. To apply to art the

principle of majority opinion as in politics, can be limiting and destructive.

Growing leisure and education will unquestionably increase the size of the direct audience for art. A limitation to its size is the uniqueness of the work of art: it exists in only one example which can be owned by one person and seen in one place at one time by relatively few people. Some day the reproduction of works of art may be perfected so that they can reach a much larger audience: what André Malraux calls "the museum without walls." Already color reproduction and art films have accomplished much; and as television develops its enormous potentialities, visual art should play as important a part in it as music has in radio. All these mediums of distribution can vastly extend the influence of the fine arts on society. And as wider sections of the public come to understand the new concepts of modern art, we may hope for a gradual closing of the present gap between artist and public. To accept the present situation as the inevitable condition of the artist in modern society, and indeed to glory in alienation as some artists and critics do, seems to me as shortsighted as the belief in majority standards.

The economics of the present art world are peculiar. Even the special art public participates in art mostly as spectators rather than patrons. Only a small proportion buys original works of art or even good prints. A larger proportion visits museums and galleries, and enjoys contemporary art, but it seldom pays to do so, as it does for concerts, books, the theater, and movies. And unlike magazines, radio, and television, art cannot get revenue from advertising. The chief financial support of the art world still comes from the wealthy, or from funds left by their predecessors.

In the United States, unlike most European countries, the national government has played little part in art. Our federal system, in which education is considered the province of the states and localities, our individualism and resistance to centralized authority, our belief in private enterprise, and our old-fashioned native suspicion of culture, have restricted governmental art activities to the necessary minimum—federal buildings, some monuments and murals. Most of these have been of ultra-conservative types. The great exception was the federal art projects of the Roosevelt administration, a by-product of the depression. The most extensive art program ever undertaken by a modern democracy, they were



also the broadest in artistic policies, with a minimum of either censorship or official propaganda. Since they ended a decade ago public art has reverted to its former status, in both scale and conservatism. Several recent developments point to a more active and intelligent federal policy; but it seems certain that it will be based on governmental use of art for essential purposes, and not on employment or support of artists.

For whom does the artist in a modern democracy create? Not for church or state except rarely; not for the wealthy except a minority of collectors; nor for industry or commerce except occasionally as a form of advertising. Chiefly he creates for the special art public (collectors, gallery-goers, his fellow artists), for museums, and for posterity—which means for himself. He seldom produces for a known use. Whereas in the past the maker of murals, altarpieces, portraits, or monuments, was creating for a definite function and place, the contemporary artist in general launches his work into a void. He produces for public exhibition and with the hope of sale to relatively few collectors or museums. For exhibiting, the most general social use of his work, he receives nothing and the public contributes nothing. Only the most salable artists who are also slow producers sell most of their works during their lifetimes. Often the bulk of a man's work remains unsold at his death. A survey made a few years ago by Elizabeth McCausland for the *Magazine of Art* showed that of several hundred of the most frequently exhibited American artists, the average income was only about one-fourth from sales, and that most of them depended for their livelihood on teaching, commercial work, work outside the art field, or private incomes. Such is the economic position of the average artist in a modern democratic society. He has his freedom, but in most cases it is the freedom to live precariously on a low income level. Let us hope that current efforts to improve his economic status, together with broadening public understanding, may give the artist a position in society more in accord with his social value.

The past few years have seen the most continuous threats to cultural freedom in America in a century or more. In all walks of life, reactionary forces are using the danger of totalitarianism from without to attack liberal elements within our society. As we have seen, artists outside the academic world, though representing many varieties of political and social opinion, are not generally champions

of conservatism. During the depression of the 1930's, radicalism was common among artists and art organizations, as in other fields. The Nazi-Soviet treaty of 1939, the second World War, and the cold war changed the viewpoints of most admirers of communism. But to the more reactionary circles of the art world, the fact that certain individuals and schools in modern art are, or have been, politically radical, makes all modern art communistic and subversive. In this they make no distinction between democratic radicalism and Stalinist totalitarianism; liberalism, socialism, communism, and totalitarianism are all one to them, and modern art is synonymous with them. It is curious to see how this identification of modern art with political subversion parallels Nazi and Soviet patterns of thought, and even of language; as well as the tendency to falsify facts for propaganda purposes. The reactionaries disregard the historic fact of the suppression of modern art by all totalitarian regimes, communist as well as fascist. One of them has even said that "the modernistic movement" in the democracies was supported by Russia, "which was anxious to take advantage of the confusion and dissension it created." This is of course the reverse of the historic truth. Artistic freedom, experimentalism, and innovation are products of democracy, and fundamentally opposed to authoritarianism. One might as well say that free speech produces dictatorship.

The plastic arts have so far been less subject to reactionary pressures than the mass communication mediums. The art world is not as centralized as films, radio, television, and the press; most artists are self-employed, and even museums, the most substantial art institutions, are independent local bodies. But artists' associations are more vulnerable to attack, and the fact that most museums receive at least part of their support from local governments, makes them liable to attacks based on politics, or on the premise that the art they exhibit or acquire must be "comprehensible" to every taxpayer.

The most serious attacks on artistic freedom have centered around governmental activities in art. One of the most essential of these activities is the international exchange of exhibitions, information, and persons. The world knows that we make efficient automobiles, planes, and atom bombs. The Hollywood film is omnipresent. But the work of our painters and sculptors is hardly known beyond our own boundaries. It would do much to correct the im-

pression of us as materialistic, standardized, sentimental, and cold-blooded. As a first step, the State Department some years ago acquired a collection of contemporary American paintings for circulation abroad. But the project was so violently attacked in Congress and in certain segments of the press, chiefly on the ground that some of the artists had in the past belonged to organizations later listed as subversive by the Attorney General, that the collection was sold; and there have been no further governmental attempts at international exchanges of contemporary art. Passports for foreign travel have been denied to many artists, and distinguished foreign artists have been barred from this country. In Congress Representative George A. Dondero of Michigan has continually attacked modern art on the grounds of subversion, calling on "the loyal, patriotic, clean-minded, right-thinking artists of this country" to "rouse themselves, band together and purge their establishments of this social disease"; and he has implied the need for a Congressional investigation of the art world. In San Francisco, local "patriotic" groups have demanded the destruction of one of the outstanding mural projects of the Federal Government, by Anton Refregier, and a joint resolution for that purpose is pending in Congress. It is encouraging that in all such cases the art world, outside of the most academic circles, has united in defense of artistic freedom, and that this united action has been effective.

As long as present world tensions continue, we can expect such threats to artistic freedom. In combatting them, we must keep our minds clear on the central issue. Freedom of artistic expression, like freedom of speech and press, is fundamental in our democracy. This fundamental right cannot be affected by the artist's political or social opinions, affiliations, or activities. The latter are personal matters, distinct from his work, which should be judged on its merits. It may be propaganda, as much great art of the past has been. If so, its merits are likely to depend on the issues which it propagandizes: a cause which is human, universal, and life-giving may inspire good propaganda art, while one which is inhuman and retrogressive will produce dead art, like the official art of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia.

Similarly, institutions and individuals have a fundamental right to exhibit or otherwise use the artist's work, free from censorship. This does not mean that government or museums are obliged to

encourage anti-democratic propaganda that is not good art. But if faced with the basic test of whether or not to include an outright communist propaganda picture which is good as art, in an official exhibition sent abroad, I for one would favor doing so, because the act of including it, and the artistic freedom which this demonstrates, would be ten times more effective propaganda for democracy, than the picture itself could be as anti-democratic propaganda.

Is our faith in democracy so feeble that we need to fear dissent? Let us remember the words of Thomas Jefferson about the University of Virginia: "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." Jefferson's words are as true today as when he wrote them. We are engaged in a worldwide ideological struggle; we cannot win by adopting the methods of our adversaries, in however modified a form. Today more than ever we should demonstrate the freedom and diversity inherent in a democracy—the most effective answer to totalitarian thought control, and the most convincing proof of the strength of democracy. In the troubled world of today, the artist's absolute freedom, his uncontrolled expression of ideas and emotions, and his disinterested pursuit of perfection, are more needed than ever in our history.