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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE POWER OF IMAGES

By

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INTRODUCTION

I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
of thoughtless youth; but hearing
oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of
ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have
felt
A presence that disturbs me with
the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense
sublime
Of something far more deeply
interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of
setting suns,
And the round ocean and the
living air,
And the blue sky, and in the
mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that
impels
All thinking things, all objects of
all thought
And rolls through all things.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

In my experience as an artist there have been many times when I have doubted and questioned the purpose of art. At times, it seemed so selfish to produce useless images when there were people starving and the world already seemed so cluttered. The reason always escaped me as to why people would pay large sums of money for art, and flock to museums to wander around in wonderment.

As an artist my doubts became stronger than my inspiration, and

I stopped producing artwork for a while. I was determined to find a function and a purpose for everything I did. Reflecting back on this stage in my life, I can recognize its importance. Although I never did find exact answers to my questions, I did one day find myself just enjoying life. I accepted it for what it was and myself as an artist. I did discover, in my studies and personal experience as an artist, some of the answers as to why art is important. I hope I can relate them in this thesis, for I found many wonderful possibilities.

CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN OF IMAGES

Images from the past are a record of the development of man. We can trace the evolution of our predecessors that define what we are today.

Primitive man related to his world with instinct. The strongest of these was his will to survive and communicate. He satisfied this by creating images of the animals that kept him alive. He hoped to gain their vitality and power. Then he shaped another image, a tool to further advance his attempts to survive. He became a tool-maker, an animal that produces work. Man found that in order to survive, he must work. Erich Fromm states that "in the process of work, that is, the molding and changing of nature outside of himself, man molds and changes himself."¹

Hence, through this simple act, man has molded and changed nature and himself into what he is today. It is my belief that, even though our evolution appears far removed from primitive man, our intellectual powers so great, and the molding and changing of nature so sophisticated, our society is still dependent on the simplistic act of creating images to communicate and survive. I hope to demonstrate in this thesis that for man to communicate and survive, he must know his "self." In this

¹Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1967), p.159.

search modern man must understand both the psychological and mystical natures that come from the primitive and instinctual side of him.

CHAPTER II

THE VALUE OF THE ARTIST

The role of the artist in our society is to create the images of the unknown for his fellow man. His work is to represent this in forms he experiences in his own being as he struggles and molds his world. C. G. Jung writes;

The unknown falls into two groups of objects; those which are outside and can be experienced by the senses, and those which are inside and are experienced immediately. The first group comprises the unknown in the outer world; the second the unknown in the inner world. We call this latter territory the unconscious.²

The artist creates from his unconscious and changes the unknown into something that can be experienced by the senses. In other words, the artist is revealing something unknown by bringing it into the realm of the conscious. This is valuable, because western man has promoted his civilization by relying on his consciousness. He learns by facts and figures and tends to isolate to understand. The unknown is then weighed, measured and classified. This has made our world, where it is possible to talk on the phone to someone a thousand miles away, go to the moon, and produce machines that appear untouched by human hands.

²C.G.Jung, Psyche and Symbol, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (Garden City, New York; Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958), p. 2.

Because of these advancements and the method used to develop them, the individual man feels lost. Man has always wondered about and grown through discovery of the unknown "self." The difficulty for western man to find the self lies in the fact that the more he relies on his consciousness, the harder it is for him to trust his intuition and instinct. Therefore, when he searches for the "self" with his logical resources, the more impossible his situation seems.

The unconscious cannot be summoned by will or desire. Artists who draw upon the unconscious to create are familiar with this fact. Robert Motherwell illustrates this by describing his experience with painting:

Sitting here on occasion I will suddenly--almost as if it were a dream--get up and grab a pot of paint and a brush and start working on a certain size canvas. And there are other times I want to and I really can't. With me, painting is not an act of will, it's a happenstance that comes from some deep inner hunger that's always there.³

Our society is production-oriented; we rush to our jobs, rush through our pre-prepared food in order to get to work and get something accomplished. We relate our success with numbers and statistics. If we can't will results, we become confused, impatient and consequently feel like failures. So, society depends upon the artist to produce images that are not motivated by conscious will and innocent of material rewards. The artist becomes the representative of the individual man.

One of the reasons the artist becomes this representative is that

³Grace Glueck, "The Mastery of Robert Motherwell," The New York Times Magazine, 2 December 1984, p. 74.

he can produce his work without the aid of technology. He may use tools and methods that have been used for centuries. Because the images or objects he makes cannot be regulated by time, he becomes a constant, a security, when time is pushed to high speed. The more the artist's work exhibits these characteristics, the more awe is provoked in the spectator. Thus, man can thumb his nose at technology. The artist is proof that man can be productive without it; machines do not really rule his life. The spectator also looks for imperfections or traces of the human touch with which he can further identify his individuality. The more the artist displays individuality and independence, the more society values him. The advancements in technology have become a paradox for man because they are supposed to make his life more comfortable and prove his superiority, but instead they make him self-conscious, inhibited and fearful for his life. Although the majority of artists can never expect their profession to be lucrative, our society does greatly reward those who express and symbolize their needs. Robert Motherwell is currently one of the most respected and rewarded artists and he exclaims, "I can't overemphasize how intuitive and primitive I am as a painter."⁴

Another valuable quality the artist possesses is his ability to eliminate self-consciousness and inhibition by using symbols. The sculptor, Henry Moore, portrays this aptitude with this passage:

Sometimes for several years running I have been to the

⁴Ibid, p. 86.

same part of the seashore--but each year a new shape of pebble has caught my eye, which the year before though it was there in hundreds, I never saw. Out of millions of pebbles passed in walking along the shore, I choose out to see with excitement only those which fit with my existing form--interest at the time.⁵

The form-interest changes with each individual, with time and circumstance, for it characterizes man's adaptability to respond spontaneously to the inner self with forms. He does this because the things he feels and struggles with are not part of his consciousness. They are from the depths of his mind, and they are also from outside of his physical being. They have no absolute form or identity, so he gives them one. His personal life experiences influence his choice of form. He has to relate them to something so, with combinations or parts of things, he can construct an image or is mysteriously attracted to one. He sees it everywhere, as Henry Moore did, picks it out of millions, and discovers it from within other objects. He is excited by it, because it has a special message, a secret, that has no language but its form. He feels he is discovering something and he really is. Leo Steinberg states:

They are without end, these questions, and their answers are nowhere in storage. It is a kind of self analysis a new image can throw you into and for which I am grateful.⁶

All men are grateful for new ways to realize their "selves" and

⁵Henry Moore, "On Sculpture and Primitive Art," Modern Artists On Art, ed. Robert L Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 142.

⁶Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art," The New Art, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 45.

for new avenues of perception. These new insights are not written in books or discussed in words, because they are, as yet, only forms and symbols. But in becoming forms each person can sensually receive them, apply descriptive words to them, share and exchange them with others.

CHAPTER III

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES

Another aspect a new image has is that it presents a problem. Julian Schnabel says, "Painting is my way of meditating reality. It gives me problems, makes me nuts, and saves my life."⁷

The presentation of a problem unsettles man and proposes a challenge to his beliefs. In order for him to solve the problem, he must understand its question, assimilate it. To assimilate it, he must accept it as a reality. If it is a reality that does not fit with his order of existence, he struggles with its acceptance. Mircea Eliade believes that very often the struggles in life, the ordeals and difficulties, the suffering that man endures, proves to him his possibilities, his creativeness and his powers. Kandinsky affirms this comprehension with his experience with images, "Thus, I learned to battle it as a being resisting by wish (=dream) to bend it forcibly to this wish."⁸

Kandinsky actualized the knowledge that the battle to create, and his power to manipulate his dream, increased his creativity. He visualized the parts of his paintings as beings, as something with a life and

⁷Grace Glueck, "What One Artist's Career Tells us of Toady's Art World." The New York Times, 2 December 1984, sec. 2, p. 6.

⁸Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," Modern Artists On Art, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 35.

desire of their own. They existed in reality and to force them or overpower them proved his superiority and control. Control does not necessarily mean having an understanding but control means having the ability to keep something and not lose it. If the image symbolizes the unknown "self," modern man, by projecting this thought on an image, can console his fear of loss of identity. And furthermore, if he can assimilate its knowledge he will have discovered something new within himself.

I have personally experienced these phenomenon. As if from nowhere and everywhere, shapes or combination of shapes will infatuate me. I feel strongly compelled to duplicate, take apart, and re-assemble these shapes. I can actively construct and study the relationship of these forms. I can mold new relationships and compositions. It is an extremely gratifying experience because I feel what once had power over me, I now overpower. Sir Herbert Read Describes the artist's strong drive to create:

One must imagine a constant force, a blind instinct, grouping towards the light, discovering an opening in the veil of nothingness and becoming aware of significant shapes.⁹

So the artist materializes the unknown into shapes and forms, makes the invisible visible. That is his role in, as Marcel Duchamp states:

All in all the creative act is not performed by the artist alone, the spectator brings the work in contact with the

⁹Sir Herbert Read, *Icon and Idea*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 27.

external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.¹⁰

I have found that I can be creating the same image for months or even years without realizing what it symbolizes. It is not until someone gives me a clue that I become conscious of the meaning of my images. It is very easy for an artist to be this unconscious of his work. He is so excited and involved in reacting to the stimuli life provides that the actual meaning is not very important. In fact it can almost be unproductive for him. Once his secret discovery is not secret anymore, it loses its mystery and challenge. The artist becomes "self-" conscious of the images he makes and in doing this loses his connection with his more creative "self."

On the positive side the sharing of the discovery becomes a dialogue between artist and the rest of society. This helps to unify man and eventually helps the artist, for then a new discovery and part of the unknown can be uncovered. This shared creative act can then promote the realization that every person has a function, a purpose, a similarity, a shared need. This enables man to discover his individuality and universality immediately. Max Beckman writes:

One of my problems is to find the self, which has only one form and is immortal--to find it in animals and men in heaven and in hell which together form the world in which we live.¹¹

¹⁰Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," The New Art, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 25.

¹¹Max Beckman, "On My Painting," Modern Artist On Art, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, New York: Prentice-HALL, Inc., 1964), p. 132.

Man is a universal being, but he can easily forget this because of his propensity to isolate the unknown in order to know it. Therefore, renewed knowledge of the universality and timelessness of images is conducive for man to recognize his spirituality. This is in part because of what C. G. Jung called the collective unconscious, "the psyche possess a common substratum transcending all differences in culture and consciousness."¹²

Also, there are images that have been made throughout time in response to certain circumstances. For example, the mandala which expresses the intuition of the individual self and the unity of life, which was once possessed, was lost, and is being searched for. Therefore, these two facts help to reveal to man his eternal universality that makes him aware of his spirituality. It is the images from the unconscious which can further man's attainment of a higher level of awareness; the awareness that our spiritual leaders have written about. C. G. Jung writes;

The symbol is the primitive expression of the unconscious, but at the same time it is also an idea corresponding to the highest intuition produced by unconsciousness.¹³

This passage by De Chirico affirms his awareness of Jung's idea:

¹²C. G. Jung, Psyche and Symbol, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1958), p. 308.

¹³Ibid, p. 326.

I remember one vivid winter's day at Versailles. Silence and calm reigned supreme. Everything gazed at me with mysterious, questioning eyes and then I realized that every corner of the palace, every column, every window possessed a spirit, an impenetrable soul. . . at that moment I grew aware of the mystery which urges men to create certain strange forms. And the creation appeared more extraordinary than the creators.¹⁴

De Chirico sensed the spirit in his surrounding and also the idea that there was something mysterious and great.

Wassily Kandinsky believes that in both religion and art, the awareness of the spirit transpires in a different manner than other realizations. He says:

Its development consists of sudden illuminations, like lightning, of explosions, which burst like a firework in the heavens, strewing a whole 'bouquet' of different shining stars about itself.¹⁵

Just as De Chirico grew aware "at that moment."¹⁶

Kandinsky also believes that revelations do not consist of new discoveries, as in science, but consist of ordinary well-known thoughts or images, as De Chirico discovered within the palace, column and window. This awareness is of the spirit beyond dimension and form, an invisible energy or vibration, hidden by physical existence. The spiritual awareness of "self" springs from the questioning of existence. Mircea Eliade States:

¹⁴Giorgio De Chirico, "Metaphysical Art," Artists On Art, ed. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 440.

¹⁵Kandinsky, p. 39

¹⁶De Chirico, p. 440.

Yet the contents and structures of the unconscious are the result of immemorial existential situations, especially of critical situations, and this is why the unconscious has a religious aura.¹⁷

When man loses touch with the unconscious he loses the source which contains both the primitive, naive "self," but also the most powerful means to achieve the enlightened "self." Friedrich Nietzsche further explains this possibility:

The artist gradually learns to like for their own sake those means that bring about the state of aesthetic elation; extreme delicacy, quality of tone; distinctness where in formal conditions distinctness is absent. All distinct things, all nuances, in so far as they recall extreme degrees of power that give rise to intoxication, kindle this feeling of intoxication by association the effect works of art is the excitation of the state that creates art, of aesthetic intoxication.¹⁸

Nietzsche continues by stating that because of this aesthetic intoxication and extreme degree of power, the artist can go beyond the self, inhibited by struggle and recognition of opposites. The artist bravely encompasses, with the instinct of power and magnificence, both the ugly and the beautiful. He not only can represent the terrible as well as the wonderful, but does so because he loves them both equally. He has no fear of the sad because he is beyond it. This is when the artist reaches a higher level of consciousness as De Chirico discovered in creation of strange forms.

¹⁷Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and The Profane, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), p. 16.

¹⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche, trans. and ed. Monroe C. Beardsley (New York: The Modern Library, 1960), p. 869.

The creations the artist makes are more extraordinary than the creator because they represent the enlightened state. I believe that this state is within all men. I believe there is a moment in every man's life when this state of elation, intoxication, timelessness and supreme peace bursts out of nowhere. Once this has happened the drive to attain it again is very strong. But because the key to it is within the unconscious, as I stated before, desire, will or reason cannot achieve it. Charles Earnest Essert writes:

If we are to achieve a more advanced state of consciousness we must learn to contact and depend upon a higher faculty than reason--a faculty which does not deal with ideas.¹⁹

Our society is beginning to recognize the power of the intuition. In a lecture given at the College for Graduate Forum, the basis for this thesis was presented by a psychologist. He said that there are basically two types of people, intuitive and logical. He said our society has rewarded and acknowledged the logical type of person, because of our belief in reason and substantiated facts. But he stated that society has recently found that the intuitive personality type was as successful and reliable as the logical personality type. Also, the intuitive person could get results much faster because he does not have to go through the logical steps to arrive at this conclusion. Of course, once western man has the statistics that intuition can speed up production he will learn to value it. The value of intuition and instinct is not

¹⁹Charles Earnest Essert, Secret Splendor (New York: Philosophical Library, 1973), p. 9.

just the spontaneous qualities they possess, but their ability to go beyond the barriers of fear and self-consciousness that inhibit our true potential.

Of late, our society has expressed an interest in other more intuitive cultures and their philosophies, but we cannot just wrap turbans around our heads or eat with chopsticks. We have to find the resources for improving our intuitivnesses and intuition from within our own culture.

Western man is attracted to more technologically underdeveloped cultures because he fears that technology will define him as an unfeeling robot, without an eternal "self." This is a product of his reasoning self that sees the superficial outward characteristics as reflections of the inner self. Man should not be afraid of machines and technology, but they should be perceived as tools to mold and change nature, similar to primitive man's use of tools. These images will never annihilate the existence of the spirit. Charles Earnest Essert writes:

Man's real powers are still undiscovered, for man is a cosmic being rather than a reasoning individual.²⁰

There is one more quality that artist's images have that completes the thought that man is a cosmic being. It is the possibility that images have a predictive function. Both Rollo May and Sir Herbert Read believe that artists express with images the conflicts in society before these conflicts emerge. For example, De Kooning's and Picasso's images of women as the archetype of all that is devouring and monstrous

²⁰Ibid, p. 52.

could have been their perception of the women's movement in the United States. Or possibly these became a catharsis for it. Just as the neo-expressionist images of today, by representing the ravages of an atomic war and self-destruction could, by materializing its possibility, prevent it.

In conclusion, of all the diverse functions and powers images may possess, the most important of these is man's questioning of the self. Man's images have represented primitive man, man's grasp of science, math and spirituality. They have also represented the humanistic, social and emotional sides of man. Man can realize through the power of images that he is mystically and psychologically one with the world around him. He is a realization of the past, maker of the present and image of the future.

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