

WASSILY KANDINSKY ON THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

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DUCTIONS, WOODCUTS AND HALF TONES

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I

INTRODUCTION

Every work of art is a child of its time, while often it is the parent of our emotions.

Thus, every cultural period creates art of its own, which can never be repeated again. An effort to revive art-principles of the past, at best, can only result in works of art resembling a still-born child. For example, it is impossible for us to relive or feel the inner spirit of the ancient Greeks. The sculptor's attempts to employ Greek principles can only achieve a similarity in form, while the work itself remains for all time without a soul. Such imitation resembles the antics of apes. Externally, the animal's movements are almost like those of human beings. The monkey sits and holds a book an inch from its nose, turns the pages, makes thoughtful faces, but there is no sense or meaning in any of these actions.

INTRODUCTION

However, another exterior similarity in artistic form-principles springs from a great need. The similarity of inner tendencies in the entire moral and spiritual atmosphere, the groping after objectives already followed through, and subsequently forgotten, invokes the similarity of inner feeling for an entire period; and leads logically to the application of such forms which, in a former period, had successfully served identical efforts. Thus, our sympathy, our understanding, our inner affinity to the Primitives came partly into existence.

Like ourselves, these pure artists sought to express inner truths in their work and, in consequence, automatically repudiated all consideration of external accidents.

This glimmer of spiritual closeness is, in spite of its great importance, no more than a spark. Our soul, after the long period of materialism, at last begins to awaken from despair born of unbelief, lack of purpose and ideals. This nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, has not yet past. The awakening soul, while trying to free itself, is still under its domination. Only a feeble light flickers, like a tiny star, in the vast encircling darkness. As a presentiment, the soul does not as yet courageously admit its fear, that the light might be a dream and the encircling darkness, reality. This doubt and still-lingering oppression, through the materialistic philosophy, divides our soul from that of the Primitives. Like a precious vase dug up, though cracked, from the depths of the earth, our broken soul does not ring true. Thus, any return to the Primitives, now experienced in the temporary assimilation of form, can only be short-lived. The similarity between art forms of the past and present can easily be seen, though diametrically opposed to each other. The first is purely external and, therefore, without a future. The second is spiritual, therefore, containing the seed of infinity. After the period of materialistic temptation, to which the human soul apparently succumbed and from whose evil attraction it finally has freed itself, the soul emerges purified by trial and suffering. The elementary, baser emotions such as fear, pleasure, sorrow, serving the contents of

INTRODUCTION

art during this period of temptation, will hardly attract the artist. He will endeavor to awaken more subtle, undefined emotions, as he himself lives a comparatively complicated, subtle life. His creative work will surely arouse in observers, who are capable of deeper response, emotions which cannot be defined in words.

The observer of today, however, is seldom attuned to those subtler vibrations. In the realm of art, he seeks a mere imitation of nature by serving a practical purpose (a life-like portrait of depiction in the ordinary sense); an imitation following certain conventions (Impressionist painting); and, finally, those expressions of an inner feeling called "Stimmung" by the Germans and best translated as sentiment*) concealing its true essence in nature-forms.

All these forms, when truly artistic, fulfill their purpose and (as in the former instance) become food for the spirit. It is particularly so in the third instance, where the observer becomes conscious of a responsive vibration within his soul. Of course, such harmony (or contrast) cannot be either worthless or superficial. Indeed, the "Stimmung" or sentiment of a painting can intensify the observer's sentimental mood and purify it. In any event, such works of art safeguard the soul from coarsening its frequency, and keep it at a certain height, much as a tuning fork pitches the strings of a musical instrument. Yet, the refined measure of time and space in sound will remain one-sided and does not at all exhaust the utmost possible effectiveness of art.

Visualize a large, a very large, a smaller or medium size building divided into various rooms. All the walls of the rooms covered with small, large and medium sized canvases. Through the medium of colour, items of "nature" are represented: animals — drinking water or lying in the grass

*) It is to be regretted that this word sentiment, which is meant to describe the poetical efforts of an artist's living soul, has been misused and finally ridiculed. Was there ever a great word that the masses did not try immediately to cheapen and desecrate?

INTRODUCTION

in light or shade; next to them a crucifixion, painted by an artist who disbelieves in Christ; flowers; or human figures sitting, standing, walking, frequently naked, many naked women (often fore-shortened from behind); apples on silver dishes, the portrait of Councilor N; a sunset; a lady in Pink; flying ducks; the portrait of Baroness X; flying geese; Lady in White; calves, dotted by the bright yellow sunlight; the portrait of His Excellency Y; another lady in Green.

Carefully listed in a book are the names of artists, the titles of their pictures. People carry these books in their hands as they go from one canvas to another and turn over the pages and read the names. Then, they go away neither richer nor poorer in spirit than when they entered; and are at once, again engulfed by their personal interests, which have nothing whatsoever to do with art. Why did they come? Each painting mysteriously contains an entire life, a life of many sufferings, hours of doubts, of enthusiasm and of delighted inspiration. Whither does this life go? Whereto directs the artist's soul its active creativeness? What is its message? "To send light into the depth of human hearts is the artist's vocation," said Schumann. "An artist is a man who can draw and paint anything," said Tolstoi. Of these two definitions of artist's activity we must choose the second, if we think of the exhibition just described. With more or less skill, virtuosity and vigor, objects are re-created on a canvas, painted either roughly or smoothly. To harmonize the whole onto the canvas is the road which leads to art. With cold eyes and indifferent spirit the spectator regards this work. The connoisseurs admire "skill" (just as one would admire the prowess of a tight-rope dancer), and enjoy the "painting" (as one would enjoy a pastry). Hungry souls leave as hungry as they came.

The masses stroll through the rooms and state their opinion; some canvases are "nice," others, "splendid." The man who could have said something to the other man, did not say it, and he who could have heard, heard nought. This condition in art is called, "L'art pour l'art."

INTRODUCTION

This destruction of the inner sound (the very life of colour) is the scattering of the artist's strength into emptiness, as is such "art for art." The artist seeks material reward for his skill, his power of invention, or vision. His purpose becomes the satisfaction of vanity and greed. Instead of intensified, co-operative work amongst artists, they scramble for possessions. There are complaints about too much competition and over-production. Hates, partisanship, cliques, jealousy, intrigues are the result of this aimless, materialistic art.*)

"U n d e r s t a n d i n g" is the approach of the observer to the artist's viewpoint. Yet, quietly the observer turns away from artists, who cannot see their life's purpose in such an art which is not needed, but who aspire to a higher goal. To understand is to elevate the onlooker to the artist's level.

Art, as the child of its age, can only repeat artistically what is already expressed in the contemporary trend. This art which bears no potentiality for the future and which, therefore, is only the child of its time, cannot grow to be a mother of the future. It is, therefore, a barren art; it is of short duration and does not survive the passing of the period nor the atmosphere which made it possible.

Such art, capable of further evolution, sprang from its spiritual period, while, at the same time, it is not merely its echo or mirror, but contains a waking to prophetic power, which can have a deep and far-reaching influence.

Spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which it is one of its mightiest

*) A few singular exceptions do not change this sad and ominous picture, and even these exceptions are to be found mainly amongst artists, whose doctrine is merely, "art for art's sake." Even though they serve a higher ideal it is ultimately a useless waste of their powers. External beauty is an element of spiritual atmosphere. Beyond this positive fact, (beautiful equals good) there lies the weakness of a talent not used to its fullest extent. (The word, "Talent" is here used in its gospel-sense).

INTRODUCTION

agents, is a complicated but definite and simplified uplifting movement. This movement is one of perception. It can take various forms, but basically it retains the same inner sense and purpose.

Veiled in obscurity are the causes moving us forward and upward by "the sweat of the brow," through suffering, evil, and pain.

