

On "Modern" Art

My purpose in this discourse is merely to bridge the gap of prejudice that exists for the ordinary student as regards "modern" art, and hope that with this prejudice removed or at least abated, he can proceed to an appreciation of one of today's foremost means of expression.

Firstly, let us deal with the term "modern" art. Art is, and always has been, the expression of one person's reaction to the world in which he lives; hence, the term "modern" is superfluous. Furthermore, the rather unpleasant connotations which have arisen around this title make it rather undesirable if we are to grant art the respect it deserves. Even the term contemporary is superfluous, but it is widely used in reference to what is really abstract art. For my purposes then, I will refer to my subject matter as an abstract or contemporary.

You may take issue with the definition of art that I used above, but let me remind you that I do not refer to painting only, but literature, and music as well. All of us have an innate creative urge which must be satisfied, and our means of satisfying it we call art. It is an expression, and must necessarily be in terms of the only environment with which we are familiar. In days gone by, trades involved creation, and were regarded as arts; but in our age we must turn to more aesthetic expressions to satisfy our creative urge, hence, hobbies and amateur musicians. We all recognize literature as being a description of, and commentary on, our world, and so is art and music in perhaps a less directly comprehensible way.

So much for generalities, now let us deal with abstract art. The first question most people ask when they see an abstract is, "What is it?" or, "What does it represent?" The answers are simply, "It's a painting," and "It represents a feeling."

Many people turn away in disgust from such works because they see in them no recognizable forms, and it seems to them that they could do just as well by haphazardly flinging paint on a canvas. Strangely enough, these people seldom become great artists. A very useful analogy which is often used to deal with this attitude is that between abstraction and music. In listening to music, we are presented with no tangible representation of anything, merely an arrangement of sounds, which mean absolutely nothing to tone deaf people. Yet these sounds have the power to evoke emotion within us, either veiled or strong, and to call upon hosts of forgotten memories and dreams.

Just as music is an arrangement of energies which produces relative reactions within us which we call sound, so abstract art is an arrangement of forces which should produce reactions just as tangible, if not more tangible than those of music. A composer sets down notes which, when interpreted and given life by musicians, must be harmonious and expressive. An artist sets down lines which, when interpreted by our eyes, must be three dimensional, forceful, yet balanced. Tone deaf people are incapable of appreciating music, just as prejudiced or unreceptive people cannot appreciate art. Please note that very few tone deaf people decry music.

When an artist contemplating an abstract regards a canvas, he is a minor god contemplating a miniature creation. (Several artists will tell you that they ARE God, but this has yet to be proven.) He has two dimensions already, and it remains for him to create a third in which to move unrestricted. He can suck the viewer in and project him out with such speed and clarity that a roller coaster sensation is produced. Or, he may draw the viewer gently from his world and suspend him quietly in a twilight, or weave him about gently, or any modification of these effects he desires. All the viewer has to do is listen quietly with his eyes, and let the perspectives, the forces, the colors, work on him as they will, as music would. If the effect is too vague, or incomplete, or disagreeable, **perhaps** it is a bad painting; taste must be acquired for these things as for all other degrees of good and bad.

A question which perhaps should have been dealt with before anything else is, "Why abstract and chaotic art? What of the portrait, the landscapes, the still lifes?" They have not disappeared. They have merely moved aside. The reason for this may well be that in a world of our kind, where confusion, fear, and hatred seem to reign, there is very little room for quiet meadows, serene faces, and the like.

Why bother to cultivate a taste for art? Well, whether we will admit it or not, we all have aesthetic needs. A sunset, a waterfall, the songs of birds, these things make us aware of that need by supplying it. When man can supply his own aesthetic needs, even if only in part, he receives as a bonus a stimulating bolster to his ego. What have we to lose if we can obtain both of these very vital satisfactions with the expenditure of a few hours of time that we aren't using right now anyway.

The key, I think, is this: listen quietly with your eyes to what the artist is saying to you in color, in motion, in delicately approached, singing balance. You'll enjoy it, if you will only try it.