

## **REFLECTION ON BEAUTY, NATURE AND ART**

Carlos Herrero Starkie

Director of IOMR

1 June 2020

During these days of withdrawal in ourselves due to confinement, we must not fall into a state of resignation and pessimism, but rather seek new ways of escape which may leave free scope for our minds. These are moments for enjoying calm and for arousing thoughts that may raise us up as human beings.

Today, profiting from the sensations that Spring inspires in me, I would like to ponder on the timeless significance of beauty, to appraise the fleeting instant of happiness which our contemplation of it can overwhelm us and meditate on its connection with nature, art and man.

A rose in its fullness, a bud outcropping, something as eternal as it is ephemeral in its periodical rebirth; two roses which reblossom every month, of a pale rose colour and winding creeper shape, which stand before me in all their haughty air, as if to declare to me that the origin of beauty lies in man's association with nature due to his capacity to contemplate, observe, feel and grant a value to what is external.

These moments are the ideal background in which our creative impulse is born. A time to spur us on to write, paint or simply to regenerate ourselves, to change the direction of our life, or continue, if possible, with greater energy along the route already chosen. Moments to recall past experiences and to allow ourselves to be drawn back to emotions which had fallen into oblivion.

The image of the blossoming of nature captivates me because it represents a sign of hope that the living world changes, that nothing remains the same, that things can develop. A feeling that makes me meditate on the idea that everything in life expires and that man strives to make himself immortal through his works, thus becoming the centre of the universe.

From this symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature, the imaginative man stands out; the one who stamps his mark on the world through his capacity to innovate, to participate in the idea of progress so characteristic of civilised man; the man who controls his impulses and does not simply react when facing what is external, but rather ponders in himself and on what surrounds him, reserving time to contemplate and enjoy a certain measure of respite, which is fundamental for anyone who desires to rise in his quality of life. An individual, in the case of an artist, who is conscious of his potential to express himself through the imitation or interpretation of natural forms, projecting himself in his work and endowing it with his personal soul that makes him transcend and become immortal.

This capacity to enthuse over the nature of persons and objects surrounding us, tends to instil in man a sense of purpose which overcomes the frustration he feels in not knowing what is the origin of the world, of his own life, of the levity of his existence and of the significance of the passage of time. This is an intimate experience of a spiritual nature which only partially softens the sense of tragedy that man bears within himself on being conscious that all that is alive is basically temporary and is opposed to all that is inactive, of a permanent nature. A feeling of commitment to an idea which in some people appears in the form of faith in the other world,

in others in an ambition to achieve success in life; in most people in sharing a life in common with another person, creating a family and, in the case of an artist, is reflected in an irrepressible creative force and in the need to leave the evidence of his existence through a work that may survive ages.

Art, as an exclusive and paradigmatic creation of man, evolves through the passage of time based on three columns which remain unchanged throughout history : Man, as the indisputable protagonist who takes over, interprets and moulds the external world, so as to create a new reality ; Nature, as everything that shows itself as something real and discernible, that can be transformed and interpreted by man; and the Sense of Spirituality, as that which occupies the area of what is inexplicable and unknown. To this must be added two elements around which Art turns: firstly the Cultural Heritage accumulated for centuries by the traditions of various different civilizations; and secondly, the Sociocultural Situation in which each artist lives. All these factors play a greater or lesser influence in the blossoming forth of the artist's work.

Man's gradual conquest of his own identity has been the driving force which has made art advance up to the present day. The different interpretations that artists of genius have given of the external world has served as sediment to foster the creativity of future generations of artists, causing the foundation of various schools of Art which have occurred during all this time.

From the XIX<sup>th</sup> century onwards and coinciding with the blossoming forth of the Romantic movement, the development of the visual arts has been characterised by a constant search for what is contemporary, expressed by artists through the rejection of academic art and by a progressive separation

from the natural world, either by focusing on themselves in their mood, as done by the Romantics, or by expressing their particular way of observing and rendering the external world, as the Impressionists do when they paint nature just as they see it, and not as it really is. This process culminates at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century with Picasso and the creation of a totally new artistic language: cubism, an explosion of all the rules of pictorial creativity which, however, maintained certain links with tradition and natural shapes. Picasso breaks down and recomposes everything according to a new order, but the form, the line, the brushstroke is still there in his work where one always observes a reference to the outside world. The same occurs with Matisse's work where his unique drawing and colouring recall to us perfectly recognizable environments due to their natural forms; we also find them in certain artists of the Surrealist school, like Dalí, Magritte or Chagall who express the relationship between the oniric world and reality, transforming the meaning of things which still dominate his artistic work.

The abrupt ending of Art, as a creation conceived by man and related to his interpretation of nature, emerges from the multiple experimental movements related to Abstract painting whose most important artists proudly declaim they represent an absolute break with the past and with natural forms, to the point that their pictorial work is not intelligible any more. The picture fails to correspond to a code recognizable by the spectator, but only expresses the conception of the artist which is sometimes intellectual, though in other cases, absolutely irrational so that art is reduced to the exclusive transference of the soul of a man without a direct link with the outer world. Abstract art mostly seeks to create a totally autonomous reality of a more cosmic than earthly order, rejecting figurative forms, simplifying colours, creating geometric surfaces perfectly designed

by the artist, or allowing himself to be unconsciously carried away by a spontaneous pictorial gesture.

Abstract Art no doubt has represented the final point in the process of breaking away from natural forms and, in my opinion, it has brought us chaos, after which no idea of progress may exist. Indeed it has supposed a milestone which has stamped the XX<sup>th</sup> century with a great artistic innovation which responds coherently to the universal pessimism which rose up as a result of two successive world wars and a response to Picasso's cubism. Only within these limits can we interpret it, but its perpetuation as an artistic style has proved to be very harmful for painting as an artistic genre, because it favours the blossoming forth of artists of little pictorial talent and because behind this absolute negation of what is natural and the complete submission of the work to the creative rhythm of the artist, there can only be the sensation of abyss and void. Henceforth, once the novelty is assumed, there is no room for a new pictorial universe which could follow its course, only repetition, boredom, apathy and fundamentally a lack of vitality.

I know, in view of the state of the art world at present, that there will be many who think just the opposite, who declare that nature is precisely what controls man's imagination and that Abstract art consecrates the freedom of the artist to meditate about the origin of the universe, revealing what is within and is not visible to the human eye but conceived by his mind, such as cosmic space, the atom, the molecule, or chaos itself which surrounds us; all these are abstract concepts much closer to the world of ideas than to the world of the senses.

I would reply to these opponents that in the very rejection of figurative art there is no consistent creative act on which a future artistic development may be planned. Only the first works following this primary idea of refusal are intrinsically original. In the actual fact of painting on a canvas in a single tone of colour and of executing on the surface three streaks, as if one were drawing, or of letting oneself be carried away, by a chance movement of one's arm, spilling, at random, paint on the canvas, there is a touch of arrogance in whoever executes these acts, not only with regard to the great masters who have preceded him, but above all regarding the spectator, who may feel an impact at the first abstract picture observed, but I wonder whether that sensation will persist when he discovers another similar painting, but of a different colour and texture.

In Abstract art there is above all obsession; artist's obsession with his own way of expressing himself, and thus has no urge to reinvent himself; that is why even the greatest Abstract Masters when they seem to have attained the touchstone of their painting they cling to it as if they were going to fall into an abyss. Mondrian and his grid, Lucio Fontana and his streaks, Rotco and his great daubs of brilliant colour, Pollock with his dripping and his action painting. They are all so repetitive, so foreseeable, and, therefore, so iconic.

Nevertheless, I would certainly point out as one of the most outstanding artistic genius of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the founder of Abstract painting and so-called "Prince of the Spirit", Wassily Kandisky, the first artist who responded to Picasso with an equally subversive work. Kandisky's art is the outcome of a restless spirit who is constantly and insatiably seeking to dig deeper into the inner realms of painting and to transfer his centre of gravity from nature to man's mind. Like Leonardo, or his great rival

Picasso, in Kandisky's work we can appreciate a clear evolution, with all its internal logical process, passing through the various creative stages in harmonious succession. At no moment Kandisky suffers a creative deadlock as has occurred to other Abstract painters.

We find the same negative nature, in the "ready made" objects by Marcel Duchamp that have influenced so intensely contemporary art and have tried to give an artistic sense to a simple object of daily use. In this case the artist denies the originality of the artistic representation in itself and limits his action to the mere choice of a concept which may be applied to any object of daily use in our life that can be exalted to the level of a work of art; everything is reduced to a simple intellectual exercise which even touches the absurd without the least manual participation by the artist.

The visual arts, to our deepest regret, have not followed the evolution of Literature that, although during the first half of the XX century it has submitted to the need to carry out vanguard experiments, it never has lost its way and has continued demonstrating tremendous creative vitality. The writer has in no way been disturbed by the new "avant garde" trends in his capacity to communicate with the reader, to make him live through situations connected with the world of real life, creating characters and environments. There we have standing before us the examples of James Joyce, Samuel Becket, Proust, Octavio Paz, Borges, Sartre, Camus, Graham Green, Truman Capote... The novel, the tale, the story, prose, have not changed in their essence throughout our long history and when they have done so, they have been able to re-establish themselves challenging the anti-academic tendencies which would have harmed the very essence of Literature if they had persisted. Poetry because of its relation to music and theatre plays due to its vocation to be represented as a visual art, have both

listened intently to the echoes of modernity; but, in general, the writer never has lost confidence in the power of the word to describe and make one feel imaginary worlds. The painter, however, has incomprehensibly renounced to give importance to that which gave his art a divine characteristic: the brush-stroke, the line drawn, the moulding of forms, everything in which may be appreciated the authentic autograph touch of the work. Nowadays, Sculpture, and above all, in my opinion, Painting, suffer from a weariness of creativity which makes them run the risk of disappearing and of being swamped by all the new forms of expression promoted by the new technologies.

It's hard work for contemporary artists who have to rescue visual art from this dead end. They are the ones who are responsible for regenerating Art through encouraging painting technique, drawing and the observation of nature. There are, no doubt, many examples which may be followed, not only the old masters, consecrated by the History of Art, but also the main figures of modern art, Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Chagall, Dalí and Hopper or Balthus, of generations closer to us; among contemporary artists, Hockney, Kiefer and Antonio López may be magnificent models to inspire a refoundation of Art. In spite of this, artists of today have forgotten the intimacy of painting in a canvas and have been driven by the trend of creating art installations, a kind of art performance very closely related to Marcel Duchamp's "ready made objects", the great influencer of our age.

The contemporary artist must return to the sources of classical inspiration, observe nature, copy the old masters, abandon the computer and pick up again the pencil and set himself to draw; in the other words, go back to his profession. Return to the world of the senses.



The world is going to change a great deal as a result of the pandemic Covid-19 and it is highly probable that we may live through the beginning of a new era. Art must react; it is worth while trying, because, even though we only make the effort through nostalgia, in our melancholy and our search for time passed away, we may find inspiration.

The clue to the question lies in observing the stately rose which was the source of this essay and has moved us to express its spiritual and symbolical significance, because beauty has no value in itself, but only when accompanied by the spirituality that man alone can instil in it.