

The Nature of Medieval Art

by

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“Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation: Art is the principle of manufacture.” —St. Thomas Aquinas

The modern mind is as far removed from the ways of thinking that find expression in Medieval art as it is from those expressed in Oriental art. We look at these arts from two points of view, neither of them valid: either the popular view that believes in a “progress” or “evolution” of art and can only say of a “primitive” that “That was before they knew anything about anatomy” or of “savage” art that it is “untrue to nature”; or the sophisticated view which finds in the aesthetic surfaces and the relations of parts the whole meaning and purpose of the work, and is interested only in our emotional reactions to these surfaces.

As to the first, we need only say that the realism of later Renaissance and academic art is just what the Medieval philosopher had in mind when he spoke of those “who can think of nothing nobler than bodies,” i.e., who know nothing but anatomy. As to the sophisticated view, which very rightly rejects the criterion of likeness, and rates the “primitives” very highly, we overlook that it also takes for granted a conception of “art” as the expression of emotion, and a term “aesthetics” (literally, “theory of sense-perception and emotional reactions”), a conception and a term that have come into use only within the last two hundred years of humanism. We do not realize that in considering Medieval (or Ancient or Oriental) art from these angles, we are attributing our own feelings to men whose view of art was quite a different one, men who held that “Art has to do with cognition” and apart from knowledge amounts to nothing, men who could say that “the educated understand the rationale of art, the uneducated knowing only what they like,” men for whom art was not an end, but a means to present ends of use and enjoyment and to the final end of beatitude equated with the vision of God whose essence is the cause of beauty in all things. This must not be misunderstood to mean that Medieval art was “unfelt” or should not evoke an emotion, especially of that sort that we speak of as admiration or wonder. On the contrary, it was the business of this art not only to “teach,” but also to “move, in order to convince”: and no eloquence can move unless the speaker himself has been moved. But whereas we make an aesthetic emotion the first and final end of art, Medieval man was moved far more by the meaning that illuminated the forms than by these forms themselves: just as the mathematician who is excited by an elegant formula is excited, not by its appearance, but by its

economy. For the Middle Ages, nothing could be understood that had not been experienced, or loved: a point of view far removed from our supposedly objective science of art and from the mere knowledge about art that is commonly imparted to the student.

Art, from the Medieval point of view, was a kind of knowledge in accordance with which the artist imagined the form or design of the work to be done, and by which he reproduced this form in the required or available material. The product was not called “art,” but an “artifact,” a thing “made by art”; the art remains in the artist. Nor was there any distinction of “fine” from “applied” or “pure” from “decorative” art. All art was for “good use” and “adapted to condition.” Art could be applied either to noble or to common uses, but was no more or less art in the one case than in the other. Our use of the word “decorative” would have been abusive, as if we spoke of a mere millinery or upholstery: for all the words purporting decoration in many languages, Medieval Latin included, referred originally not to anything that could be added to an already finished and effective product merely to please the eye or ear, but to the completion of anything with whatever might be necessary to its functioning, whether with respect to the mind or the body: a sword, for example, would “ornament” a knight, as virtue “ornaments” the soul or knowledge the mind.

Perfection, rather than beauty, was the end in view. There was no “aesthetic,” no “psychology” of art, but only a rhetoric, or theory of beauty, which beauty was regarded as the attractive power of perfection in kind and as depending upon propriety, upon the order or harmony of the parts (some would say that this implied, dependent upon certain ideal mathematical relations of parts) and upon clarity or illumination the trace of what St. Bonaventura calls “the light of a mechanical art.” Nothing unintelligible could have been thought of as beautiful. Ugliness was the unattractiveness of informality and disorder.

The artist was not a special kind of man, but every man a special kind of artist. It was not for him to say what should be made, except in the special case in which he is his own patron making, let us say, an icon or a house for himself. It was for the patron to say what should be made; for the artist, the “maker by art,” to know how to make. The artist did not think of his art as a “self-expression,” nor was the patron interested in his personality or biography. The artist was usually, and unless by accident, anonymous, signing his work, if at all, only by way of guarantee: it was not who, but what was said, that mattered. A copyright could not have been conceived where it was well understood that there can be no property in ideas, which are his who entertains them: whoever thus makes an idea his own is working originally, bringing forth from an immediate source within himself, regardless of how many times the same idea may have been expressed by others before or around him.

Nor was the patron a special kind of man, but simply our “consumer.” This patron was “the judge of art”: not a critic or connoisseur in our academic sense, but one who knew his needs, as a carpenter knows what tools he must have from the smith, and who could distinguish adequate from inadequate workmanship, as the modern consumer cannot. He expected a product that

would work, and not some private *jeu d'esprit* on the artist's part. Our connoisseurs whose interest is primarily in the artist's personality as expressed in style—the accident and not the essence of art—pretend to the judgment of Medieval art without consideration of its reasons, and ignore the iconography in which these reasons are clearly reflected. But who can judge whether anything has been *well* said or made, and so distinguish good from bad as judged by art, unless he be fully aware of *what* was to be said or done?

The Christian symbolism of which Emile Mâle spoke as a “calculus” was not the private language of any individual, century, or nation, but a universal language, universally intelligible. It was not even privately Christian or European. If art has been properly called a universal language, it is not such because all men's sensitive faculties enable them to recognize what they see, so that they can say, “This represents a man,” regardless of whether the work has been done by a Scotchman or a Chinaman, but because of the universality of the adequate symbolism in which its meanings have been expressed. But that there is a universally intelligible language of art no more means that we can all read it than the fact that Latin was spoken in the Middle Ages throughout Europe means that Europeans can speak it to-day. The language of art is one that we must relearn, if we wish to understand Medieval art, and not merely to record our reactions to it. And this is our last word: that to understand Medieval art needs more than a modern “course in the appreciation of art”: it demands an understanding of the spirit of the Middle Ages, the spirit of Christianity itself, and in the last analysis the spirit of what has been well named the “*Philosophia Perennis*” or “Universal and Unanimous Tradition,” of which St. Augustine spoke as a “Wisdom, that was not made, but is now what it always was and ever shall be”; some touch of which will open doors to the understanding of and a delight in any traditional art, whether it be that of the Middle Ages, that of the East, or that of the “folk” in any part of the world.

(From *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover Publications Inc.)

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

On rising, the physical sun lights up the physical world and everything in it people, animals and the rest pouring its light equally over all; it reigns at midday and then hides again, leaving in darkness the places over which it shone. But the sun of the intellect, once it begins to shine, shines always, totally and immaterially contained in everything and at the same time remaining apart from its creatures, inseparably separated from them, since it is wholly in everything and at the same time is in none of the creatures exclusively (for at the same time it is elsewhere also). The whole of it is in the visible and the whole of it is in the invisible: it is totally present everywhere and yet exclusively present nowhere.

St. Simeon the New Theologian.