

MAN AS ARTIST
by Martino A. Abellana

The earliest known drawings are those found in the caves of Altamira, Santander, Spain and those found also in caves in Las Caux, France. Scientists estimate that some of those cave drawings could be as old as 30,000 years, while others may range from 15,000 to 10,000 B.C.

It is not clearly established whether those cave arts were made as pre-hunting rituals or were drawn as pure decorations to enliven the otherwise drab walls of those cave dwellings. But whichever was the case, those collective art works of the cavemen were the first signals, from the pre-dawn of history, that man has the capacity to perceive beauty, to visualize abstract ideas and dream new orders and forms. These peculiar capacities in man were actually the fabric of his creative force that would one day bring about those masterpieces in Art and Architecture that would transform the face of the earth;—and which in science and technology, would give man the instrument to explore the depths of the oceans and span the universe.

The creative faculty of the mind of man was fed by his primitive surroundings and by his experiences. His emotional reactions to those surroundings and his experiences gave him the eyes of a poet. Thus when he looked at his fellow cave-hunters hunting down the great mammoth elephants, conquering the saber-toothed tigers and fighting off the big haeynas and the grizzly bears, he had visions of the ideal man, strong in mind and body—which were later embodied in the classical sculptures of Greece and in the sculptures and paintings of the great Michelangelo. Listening to the terrifying rumble of the thunderstorms as they rolled down the unscalable mountains of snow, cavemen heard instead grand harmonies that would one day be recaptured in the great compositions of Bethooven in all their majesty and power.

Yet, inspite of the cave drawings, Art, as we know it today, did not receive its real impetus until around 8,000 B.C., when man started to settle down earnestly in his first farm in the village of Catal Huyuk in what is now Turkish Anatolia, Asia Minor. Because, he was, by now more stable than he was before, man could concentrate on making different kinds of implements for peace and also for war. Always, he tried to embellish those implements with carvings so that they were not merely useful but also beautiful.

Craftsmanship developed with experience so that it came about that technical excellence became a quality primarily sought after not only in handicrafts but also in art works. Thus, today, we thrill to the technical perfection not only of the craftsman but also of the piano or violin virtuoso, and the masterful brush strokes of an Artist.

Yet, mere craftsmanship, when not interrelated to a creative idea, is a hallow achievement which does not rate high as art. Instances are many in art history, where in mere technical brilliance, whether in painting, sculpture, architecture or music, only produced superficial works devoid of vitality. Those works could perhaps serve well as decorations but could not satisfy man's aesthetic sense.

The gradual bankruptcy of spiritual content in a work of art, is abated by the materialism of the people and the lack of artistic integrity in the artists. Genuine works of art are hard to come by and when they are found, one is up to discover the lonely figure of an artist heroically opposing the tendency of the materialists to acquire works for the wrong reasons, thus, unwittingly subverting the artists.

At this juncture, the only way out would seem to be, a return to nature, the source of all designs. Henri Matisse, one of France's greatest modern artists, counselled young American art students to make a periodic return to nature to replenish used up design faculties. In the same view, the great American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, suggested a study of natural forms and phenomena as a source of design so that architects would be able to design without the need to imitate the imitations of imitators.

Yet, going back to nature without understanding and without love would be a simple waste of time and effort. One has to recapture his capacity for youth, for romance, and for dreaming. In short, one has got to have the heart and the eyes of a poet before one can ever hope to open the secrets of nature. Only then, will the humble violet sum up for man the story of creation. There is a Chinese proverb which says, "If you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy white hyacinths for the soul."

Michelangelo, with poetic insight, visualized the spiritual grandeur inherent in man and depicted him so in his immortal statues of Moses, David and the Pieta. Again, he gave proofs of his poetic visions in the overwhelming murals of the ceiling and altar of the Sistine chapel at St. Peter's in Rome. Yes, from the Greeks to Shakespeare; from Da Vinci to Picasso; from Rembrandt, Beethoven and Bach to the modern masters, we can go on innumrating all those "dreaded names" in art to find a common denominator spelled out in bold letters, **POETRY**. For this gives them the capacity to perceive beauty in nature, to visualize abstract ideas and dream new orders and forms. For this also gives them the capacity to sense the universal in the particular. They look at what is commonplace and prosaic and perceive the poetic. Once an artist has developed a poetic insight, he has only to evolve a technique that would best bring out forcefully the content of form in his art work. When he has accomplished this and has established an interaction of technique and content or form, we can say that a good technique or style is achieved as opposed to mere sleekness or cleverness in handling. Because Johann Sebastian Bach was able to achieve harmony between technique and content in his great works, we can say that he had a perfect technique and had style, because of that technical perfection. On the other hand, there was Rembrandt, whose halting brush strokes were just right for the rendering of the textured skin of the old people he loved to essay in paint. Paul Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh all have techniques that were far from sleek but which harmonized very well with their creative ideas.

This interaction between technique, medium and content or creative idea is nowhere more dramatically demonstrated than in the works of the masters of modern art. Freed from the tyranny of the descriptive methods of the old approach, the modern artist could now express directly, through his technique and medium, any creative idea he visualizes. Where the old master had to express himself through objects in nature, the

modern masters may even dispense completely with natural objects, giving him utmost freedom of expression. If a modern artist would, for instance, like to express a certain mood, he may use a certain color juxtaposition that would best express the particular mood without having to depend upon nature. Thus, a feeling of sadness may be expressed directly by using depressing colors. In fact any emotion may be expressed directly with the use of the different elements of design like line, form, tone, space, color and texture. With the modern approach, art is finally free of extraneous purposes and has now approximated the purity of music, the purest of all art forms.

Yet, the creation of a truly vital work of art is not achieved automatically by simply following either the old or the new concept. It could not even be achieved by being a part-time poet. Over and above all these, there should be a strong conviction, a passion, a pride bordering on arrogance, for without passion, even technical excellence would fall flat. Mediocre works may perhaps be useful, even decorative, but could never arouse in us our deepest emotions; they do not transport us to regions of perfect spiritual felicity and rest.

In conclusion, it is plain to see that man, as artist, has got to worship at the altar of technique at the outset of his training while at the same time, sharpening his poetic sensibilities. Then when he is prepared, both technically and emotionally, to produce works of art, he must do so with a singleness of purpose, with intensity and with a passion of a true creator – remembering also that in the final analysis, it is not only the superficial effect or technique that produces a great work of art; it is the quality of the creative idea coupled or integrated with a personal style that masterpieces are created. It is well to remember also that “art is not for the petty little emotions of the mediocre, it must strike fire in the hearts of men”.

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