



THE SHAPE OF CONTENT

BY BEN SHAHN

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Artists in Colleges

I have come to Harvard with some very serious doubts as to whether I ought to be here at all.

I am a painter; I am not a lecturer about art nor a scholar of art. It is my chosen role to paint pictures, not to talk about them.

What can any artist bring to the general knowledge or the theoretical view of art that has not already been fully expounded? What can he say in words that he could not far more skillfully present in pictorial form? Is not the painting rather than the printed page his testament? Will he not only expend his energies without in any way increasing the general enlightenment? And then, what can an audience gain from listening to an artist that it could not apprehend far more readily simply by looking at his pictures?

Here are a few of the honest questions, and I have tried to meet them with honest answers.

Perhaps the most pertinent of the questions has been as to just what I can accomplish by such a verbal Odyssey as this series of discussions promises to be. My personal answer has been that the need to formulate clearly those things which I think I think may be

of some value to me, and that the process will be interesting. But what about you?

From the point of view of both the audience and the university I can only suggest that the venture will probably prove about as worthy as the ideas will be good.

But there is a further reason for my being particularly interested in being here, and undertaking some such discussions. Within the past few years there has developed an increased interest in art within the universities with the promise—the possibility at least—that they may come to constitute the new art community. Such a prospect has so much to recommend it, so much in the way of intellectual stimulation for art, in the way of values and perhaps of sympathetic climate, that one hopes it may be realized.

At the same time, there is always the possibility that art may be utterly stifled within the university atmosphere, that the creative impulse may be wholly obliterated by the pre-eminence of criticism and scholarship. Nor is there perfect unanimity on the part of the university itself as to whether the presence of artists will be salutary within its community, or whether indeed art itself is a good solid intellectual pursuit and therefore a proper university study.

Such questions have been the subject of extensive conferring and surveying within the past few years, of changing attitudes on the part of the colleges and of heated disagreement; for the whole problem of creativity often reaches into basic educational philosophy, and sometimes into university policy itself.

I have a number of observations to make on this possible forthcoming alignment. They are not all of them optimistic, but they are based upon considerable familiarity on my part with the art-university relationship in process. They are made in the hope that something really fruitful may emerge and that some of the existing misconceptions and maladjustments may be erased. They are made particularly in the hope that the student who happens to be a young person of talent and ability in art may no longer be caught



between two impossible choices; the one whether to gain a liberal education at the cost of losing his creative habit, the other to sacrifice his liberal education in order to gain an adequate training in art.

But let us ask what possible interest the university as such can have in art? In what way can art possibly augment its perspective?

There is first the question of the educated man; and then I think there is the rather flat fact of which we are all most uncomfortably aware, that our average university graduate emerges from his years of study as something less than an educated man or woman. He is likely to be most strikingly wanting in the accomplishment of perceptivity, in the noncurricular attributes of sensitiveness and of consideration toward all those finer arts which are generally conceded to have played a great part in the humanizing of man. And our graduate is not unlikely to display total blindness with regard to painting itself.

Nowhere do his limitations become so conspicuous as in his contacts with Europeans of similar background and education. For the European, whatever his shortcomings in other directions, will be perfectly conversant with the art and literature of his own country as well as with that of others. It is not at all improbable that he will know considerably more about American art than will the American himself. Today, in view of our increasing commerce with European countries, this art-blindness of ours tends to become not just a cultural gap, but even something of a diplomatic hazard.

François Mauriac has said of us: "It is not what separates the United States from the Soviet Union that should frighten us, but what they have in common . . . those two technocracies that think themselves antagonists, are dragging humanity in the same direction of de-humanization . . . man is treated as a means and no longer as an end—this is the indispensable condition of the two cultures that face each other."

Jean-Paul Sartre has said, "If France allows itself to be influenced by the whole of American culture, a living and livable situation there will come here and completely shatter our cultural traditions . . ."

In England, V. S. Pritchett wrote of us, "Why they should not

be originally creative is puzzling. It is possible that the lack of the organic sense, the conviction that man is a machine—turns them into technicians and cuts them off from the chaos, the accidents and intuitions of the creative process?”

I do not agree with any one of these opinions, but I believe that they do serve to demonstrate the uneasy view that is taken of us by a few very eminent Europeans.

But that uneasy view is not confined to European countries. There have arisen some complaints on the domestic scene also, and some from very unexpected sources. A leading executive, for instance, of one of our really vast industries undertook a circuit through a number of American universities a year or so ago with only this in view: to persuade the colleges to do a better job of educating their graduates. He asked that the liberal arts be re-emphasized; he pointed out that, while technical, scientific, and other specialized training has been very advanced, there has been lacking a quality of imagination, a human view of things, which is as necessary to industry and business as is technical training.

I think that many universities today are seeking to counteract such overemphasis upon technological education and are beginning to re-emphasize liberal education. I note a great increase, at least I think I do, in serious theater, in exhibitions of painting and sculpture, in the loan of art to students, in publications of diverse sorts, but of a serious nature. I think all this activity represents an intelligent effort to place the student in a cultured and creative environment rather than to inject culture into him hypodermically, so to speak, via the specific, required, and necessarily limited classroom course.

Besides the practical objective of producing a better-educated graduate, one who may meet the new need for the international citizen, the university has other possible objectives in extending its hand toward art, these both philosophical and generous.

It has become obvious that art itself in America is without what

might be called a natural environment. Art and artists often exist within a public climate that is either indifferent or hostile to their profession. Or otherwise they may concentrate within small colonies wherein they find a sort of self-protection and self-affirmation. The art colonies are severely limited in the variety of experience and opinion which they can contribute to art. They become almost monastic in the degree of their withdrawal from common society; and thus their art product becomes increasingly ingrown, tapping less and less the vital streams of common experience, rejecting more and more the human imperatives which have propelled and inspired art in past times. By bringing art into the circle of humanistic studies, some of the universities consciously intend to provide for it a sympathetic climate, and one in which there will naturally be found sources of stimulation, of lore, of intellectual material, and even of that element of controversy on which art thrives so well.

Philosophically, I daresay such a policy will be an item in the general objective of unifying the different branches of study toward some kind of a whole culture. I think that it is highly desirable that such diverse fields as, let us say, physics, or mathematics, come within the purview of the painter, who may amazingly enough find in them impressive visual elements or principles. I think that it is equally desirable that the physicist or mathematician come to accept into his hierarchy of calculable things that nonmeasurable and extremely random human element which we commonly associate only with poetry or art. Perhaps we may move again toward that antique and outmoded ideal—the whole man.

Such, I think, is the university's view and objective in embracing the arts however cautiously it may proceed. But the artist's view must also be considered and the question of whether the university will become his natural habitat, or will spell his doom. This highly debatable point has its implications for all the creative arts within the university, as well as for the artist-teacher, the artist-in-



residence, and by all means, the artist-student.

The first observation to be made here is the rather obvious one that art has its roots in real life. Art may affirm its life-giving soil or repudiate it wholly. It may mock as bitterly as did Goya, be partisan, as was Daumier, discover beauty within the sordid and real as did Toulouse-Lautrec. Art may luxuriate in life positively and affirmatively with Renoir, or Matisse, or Rubens, or Vermeer. It may turn to the nebulous horizons of sense-experience with the Post-Impressionists, the Cubists, the various orders of Abstraction-

ist, but in any case it is life itself as it chances to exist that furnishes the stimulus for art.

That is not to say any special branch or section of life. Any living situation in which an artist finds material pertinent to his own temper is a proper situation for art. It would not have made sense for Paul Klee to have followed the boxing circuit nor for George Bellows to have chased the vague creatures that lurk within lines and squares or to have pursued the innuendoes of accidental forms which yielded so much treasure to Klee. Yet each of these artists found in such casual aspects of reality a form of life, a means to create an *oeuvre*, to build a language of himself, his peculiar wit and skill and taste and comprehension of things.

While I concede that almost every situation has its potential artist, that someone will find matter for imagery almost anywhere, I am generally mistrustful of contrived situations, that is, situations peculiarly set up to favor the blossoming of art. I feel that they may vitiate the sense of independence which is present to some degree in all art. One wonders how the Fauves would have fared without the Bourgeoisie, how Cézanne would have progressed if he had been cordially embraced by the Academy. I am plagued by an exasperating notion: What if Goya, for instance, had been granted a Guggenheim, and then, completing that, had stepped into a respectable and cozy teaching job in some small—but advanced!—New England college, and had thus been spared the agonies of the Spanish Insurrection? The unavoidable conclusion is that we would never have had “Los Caprichos” or “Los Desastres de la Guerra.” The world would not have been called upon to mourn for the tortured woman of the drawing inscribed “Because She Was a Liberal!” Nor would it have been stirred by Goya’s pained cry, “Everywhere It Is The Same!” Neither would it have been shocked by his cruel depictions of human bestiality, nor warned—so graphically, so unforgettably—that fanaticism is man’s most abominable trait.

Thus it is not unimaginable that art arises from something

stronger than stimulation or even inspiration—that it may take fire from something closer to provocation, that it may not just turn to life, but that it may at certain times be compelled by life. Art almost always has its ingredient of impudence, its flouting of established authority, so that it may substitute its own authority, and its own enlightenment.

How many ponderous tracts have been written upon those drips and threads of paint by which the late Jackson Pollock made himself known! If his peculiar decor has its human dimension, that does not lie within the time-space, the interplanetary meanings so often ascribed to the work, but rather in the impudence of setting forth such work; the boldness of recognizing the beauty which does reside in such a surface; the executing of it, the insistence upon presenting such effects as art. I doubt whether, in a completely benign atmosphere, such an art as Pollock's would have been born; whether it would have produced the degree of shock and opposition which may well have been one of the most stimulating factors in its growth.

So I believe that if the university's fostering of art is only kindly, is only altruistic, it may prove to be also meaningless. If, on the other hand, the creative arts, the branches of art scholarship, the various departments of art are to be recognized as an essential part of education, a part without which the individual will be deemed less than educated, then I suppose that art and the arts will feel that degree of independence essential to them; that they will accept it as their role to create freely—to comment, to outrage, perhaps, to be fully visionary and exploratory as is their nature.

Art should be well-subsidized, yes. But the purchase of a completed painting or a sculpture, the commissioning of a mural—or perhaps the publication of a poem or a novel or the production of a play—all these forms of recognition are the rewards of mature work. They are not to be confused with the setting up of something not unlike a nursery school in which the artist may be

spared any conflict, any need to strive quite intently toward command of his medium and his images; in which he may be spared even the need to make desperate choices among his own values and his wants, the need to reject many seeming benefits or wishes. For it is through such conflicts that his values become sharpened; perhaps it is only through such conflicts that he comes to know himself at all.

It is only within the context of real life that an artist (or anyone) is forced to make such choices. And it is only against a back-



ground of hard reality that choices count, that they affect a life, and carry with them that degree of belief and dedication and, I think I can say, spiritual energy, that is a primary force in art. I do not know whether that degree of intensity can exist within the university; it is one of the problems which an artist must consider if he is to live there or work there.

So the answers to the question—Is it possible for an artist to function fully within the university?—must be a series of provisional ones.

Ideally, yes, for as an intellectual center, the university can provide background and stimulation to the artist; it can broaden him as an individual; it can conceivably provide new directions for art. All this, if one accepts the thesis that art is an intellectual as well as an emotional process, and that it thus profits by an expanded range of knowledge and experience.

Ideally, yes, for art scholarship itself should provide continuity and perspective for the artist, should enrich his imagery, should in every way complement the creative process by the scholarly one.

Ideally, yes, the artist ought to function well within the university community for it seems desirable that the one-sidedness of the educational pattern be counteracted, and in this sense art has a mission to perform as well as an advantage to gain. Yes, too, because within the university art may become familiar to, and accepted by, those young people who will probably constitute the taste-makers of tomorrow, the intellectual leadership, the future audience of art.

Thus, ideally we may conclude that the university holds great promise for art. Factually, however, there are circumstances which render the prospects less optimistic.

One such circumstance is the record itself of artists who have lived in residence or taught in the universities over a number of years. In the report issued in 1956 by the Committee on the Visual

Arts at Harvard University we read the following well-considered lines:

In too many cases, unfortunately, the artist-teacher gradually develops into something else: the teacher who was formerly an artist. Too often the initial basis of appointment was fallacious. In the desire to find an artist who would "get along" with art historians, the department acquired a colleague who got along well enough but turned out to be neither much of an artist nor much of a teacher. Few artists [the report continues] are sufficiently dedicated to teaching to make a career of it. Over a long time, the danger is that the artist will produce less and less art while still preserving the attitude that his teaching is of secondary importance to it.

In support of this observation, I will recount a few instances: I have one friend who has been artist-in-residence at a great Western university for some years. He is well paid. When I first knew him he was a bright light in American art, one of the good names. Full of vigor, imagination, and daring—and good thinking too—he was then producing one impressive canvas after another, and he was beginning to be sought after by collectors and museums. Today he is painting small decorative vignettes, I cannot understand why. One cannot help but observe that his work today reflects what must be polite good taste—a sort of decorator taste—in the small city in which the university is situated. The university itself seems to have absorbed very little of this man's influence. On the walls of his fine studio there still hang a number of his large earlier canvases, a sort of indecorous reminder that he was once a brash and bold young painter.

Such a change may certainly take place in a man for a number of reasons and under all sorts of circumstances, and it would be unfair to attribute it to the academic situation were it not for other similar instances.

I can at the moment recall three other artists each of whom has