

SOME MODERN PAINTINGS AND THEIR PAINTER

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Just as the early recollections and dreams of a person correspond to and, if correctly interpreted, reveal his life style, so, we would expect, the works of a painter not only to communicate their own message to those who look at them, but also express the personality of the painter. The following is an Adlerian attempt at interpreting a painting.

“EFFORTS”—SOCIAL REBELLION OR NEUROSIS?

In the window of a private art galley in Tel-Aviv I notice a large square painting which arrests attention by its very ugliness. Considering its color, design, and composition the artist is no amateur. Some people who are looking at it, turn away in disgust; others find it interesting and are ready to discuss it dispassionately. What is my reaction?

Before describing the actual painting, I put myself in the skin of a young painter who loathes our society; who utterly disagrees with the inhuman “establishment,” and furiously condemns it. How could he pictorially communicate this thoughts and feelings? By what symbol could he show us how a powerful action would sweep away all the dirt produced in this society from which he feels so alienated? An artist such as this might paint a man sitting on the toilet and, by pulling the chain, quickly flushing away all that is noxious. It would not be a delicate motif; perhaps more suitable for a pencilled caricature; and with whatever artistry he painted this picture, probably nobody among those in favour of the *status quo* of our world would buy it.

Could a painter with such a work possibly communicate to his contemporaries something as important as, for instance, Zola did with his article *J'accuse!* in the Dreifus affair? A painting such as we have described would shock the bourgeois but hardly influence a single person to achieve greater social awareness. And could a rebel afford to pay 150 pounds for it? To judge by certain written and pictorial decorations in many young people's rooms the painter would perhaps like to hang it in his.

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The actual painting which I shall now describe does indeed show a man sitting on a toilet. Only his head, with closed eyes and tense features, is natural; the other parts of the body are given in outline by wooden boards, between which there is empty space. In the free space which constitutes the man's trunk hangs his heart. Out of the basin over which he is sitting appear head, shoulders, and an arm of a female figure. This female figure, diminutive as a Lilliputian in the company of Gulliver, holds in her hand the end of a string which is connected to the heart of the man. He is about to pull the chain. By flushing the water, he would get rid of the female figure; but she would also sever his heart and bear it off. One can perceive a dramatic tension in the situation which represents, however, a false dilemma, as I shall show.

The first, imagined painting that I described might be considered a valid protest against the evils of our civilization, and be evaluated as a "political" picture along the same line as those of a Hogarth or a George Gross who pointed a finger at the hypocrisy of the upper class of their times. A similar socio-critical intention can be noticed in the works with which creative writers of the rising bourgeoisie in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the poets of the European working class in the first decades of our century, attacked the social injustice held up by their respective ruling class. The confluence of the sensitive poets' own feelings with those of their rising class could produce eminent works.

The real painting under discussion—and that is its striking peculiarity—implies no class struggle, but the inequality of the sexes, the superiority of the male. This social injustice is not criticized, but sexuality and love are altogether degraded. The female, much smaller than the male sitting over her, is appallingly diminished through the very place where the painter has put her. The male seems in fear that the female will tear his heart out, and he sees his only, but ineffective, defense against this enemy by pulling the chain. . . His face, therefore, is contracted into a hideous grimace, as inhuman as the whole perversely imagined situation.

The painter calls his work "Efforts"—but only cooperative efforts of man and woman can solve their problems. Even if sexual perversions have historically often found expression in art, mankind as a whole has solved the sexual problem in the right way—or none of us would exist. The painting shows a case of private pathology.

To accuse society with such a picture evades the real issue, as under any social condition each man and woman can find—and should be helped to find—the possibilities of a dignified togetherness in relative happiness. Thus problems on which this painter broods personally are startlingly revealed in his painting: a fear of life itself, and of women in particular. The latter is emphasized by his complete inability to see a satisfactory solution of the sexual question which is, after all, a social one. Normal viewers will find his phantastic “dilemma” neither tragic nor comic, but just pitiable.

The director of the gallery readily agreed to the request to take this painting out of the show window. It was made by parents who were afraid that their children would be unduly frightened. They may have felt that this artistic creation suggests to the viewer a devitalizing pessimism. To reach the distant goal of mankind living in solidarity, we must lose no time in trying to put the principle of human equality into practice.

THE PAINTER'S LIFE STYLE

If our concept of life style is valid, then other works of this painter should embody traits which confirm the above interpretation, and enrich the impression of his pathological attitude to life and love.

A Strange Woman

The painting in the window was part of a one-man exhibition. A second painting in this exhibition showed a woman who has, parallel with her eyes, and covering her forehead, two more sets of eyes, six eyes altogether. No normal man would fall in love with this monster whose strange face and long neck are frightening. She seems to say: Beware! Seeing much more than all of you, I am dangerous! This message again misleads the viewer and only mirrors the painter's own fear of women. Surrealistically trampling on the admittedly not always beautiful reality, the painting does not at all transcend it towards human solidarity.

A Tired Cellist

Another of this man's large paintings shows in the foreground a sitting female figure without clothing, except for a top hat and old leather shoes. As in the first painting, her limbs and trunk are indicated only in contours by wooden boards. She has a cello before her, but her eyes are closed and she does not play; rather, she sharply declines her

head to the side and leans her bow on a stone block next to her. Is she tired? Is the music she meant to play too difficult for her to execute? Again an abortive "Effort"?

She is not alone! At a distance, and much smaller than she, there stands a conductor in front of a music stand. He is conventionally dressed, though a conductor would, in this situation, not wear a top hat; but his feet are three casters as one finds them on furniture. The chair on which the woman is sitting—and which forms simultaneously her body!—has similar casters. This little conductor lifts his baton and with a blank face looks at the cellist, obviously disappointed: The poor man cannot make her play according to his conducting.

There is a further similarity between the two uncooperative figures: Both wear the same kind of very high black top hat. Traditional psychoanalysts would presumably see in this a sexual symbol, reinforced by the number three of the man's mechanical feet. In our interpretation the disharmony between the two would seem to be indicated. As he is standing, his top hat rests vertically; hers, as she leans her head to the side, has a nearly horizontal position. Also, she has the central position in the painting and assumes the importance usually given to man.

Meeting the Painter

It is characteristic of the life style that its main theme is expressed through a wide variety of manifestations of an individual. In the present case we find fear of women as the theme which is expressed in all three paintings. The first woman though tiny and insignificant may yet tear your heart out. The second woman threatens you by seeing more than anyone else, while the third woman diminishes you through unmoveable stone-like uncooperativeness where pliant cooperation is called for.

The director of the gallery kindly arranged for me to meet the painter whom he described as a "hippy." Would this meeting verify or falsify my interpretation of his work?

The man was 27 years old, did not look particularly excentric and seemed rather shy. He stated that he had studied at an art academy for four years.

In our talk his utter indifference to problems social and political came to light. Yet he was obviously very gratified by all the conflicting views announced in the press about his exhibition. He said he sought to present "human problems," without construing any message. This confirmed the attitude I had found in his pictures.

When I asked about his opinion on marriage, he answered that he was against it. He and his girl friend had been living together for two years unmarried. He did not answer unequivocally my admittedly indiscreet question, considering that he was not my client, if she was as content in this relationship as he was himself.

As we stood together in front of his painting, "Efforts," I gave him my interpretation, avoiding any stress on its pathological aspect. Thereby I succeeded in evoking a slight twist of his face. (Dreikurs' "recognition reflex"). It seemed to indicate his agreement, as perhaps the real meaning of the work dawned on him for the first time.

I led him to his painting of the six-eyed female and asked him to explain it. He said he liked women, but some were too "nosy," too . . . Unable to hit on the right word for what he meant, he shaped his hands in the form of claws, which reminded me of a harpy. This statement corresponded to the significant "yes-but" attitude, by which Adler characterized the neurotic. Our painter likes women—but . . .

CONCLUSION

Like the three paintings discussed, all the other works in this painter's exhibition showed a sensational-phantastic play with colors and forms, using distorted or dissected human figures and inanimated objects. Not a single plant or tree vivified the bare spaces in which the painter had placed them. The work may be significant from the viewpoint of painting technique (not a view I hold); yet this artistic gimmicking, representing as it does the morose side of life, appears to non-painters as nihilistic. The only artistic and human enrichment which an intensive critical viewing of the works in this exhibition could give me was the comprehension of the artist's hostile attitude toward life and its real problems. Meeting the man confirmed the impression which the paintings had given me: of a discouraged human being with underdeveloped social interest and a "yes-but" attitude of hesitation and doubt toward women, mixed with fear.