

The Work of Art in a Post-Classical Era

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The final stage of the Roman Empire brought with it nostalgia for the classical era that was reflected in the works of art of the time. However, as Christianity became the official religion in Europe, the dogma gradually impregnated the artistic work. This came to play a representative, spiritual role. Although official art rejects subjugation to classical style, its influence was never entirely lost. The dogma contributes to disseminating the art that emerged in its sacred form, which during the Middle Ages spread throughout the Mediterranean creating links between peoples and religions. Only in the 15th century, with the arrival of the Renaissance, did artistic work return all the splendour of the past to the classical forms.

Art, whose eternal vocation is to be a giver of sense, to return to man, lost in the mundane labyrinth, submerged in the plurality of tensions that divide him, the identity of a culture, cannot and must not be compromised in disorder and fragmentation.

Anne Cauquelin, *Court traité du fragment.*

A new work of art made its appearance in the final stages of the Roman Empire when the sarcophagi adorned with mythological scenes and portraits of the patricians gave way to a style that in a short time made possible mosaics like those of Ravenna, where Emperor Justinian with his retinue and, on the panel in front, Empress Theodora with a group of women are represented. This *Bildungstradition*, Wolfram von den Steinen (1965) would say, was spread for centuries, anchored in the nostalgia of the classical era, whose fragments were sought in the remains of houses, in the old sculptures or in the cameos of grandmothers kept in a corner of the wardrobe, which gave a special patina

to the works of art of the time, product of a conception of art permeable to interchanges and aesthetic fusions, a privileged vehicle of acculturation.

The interruption of classical art corresponds to the sinking of Greco-Roman political culture, basically of pagan roots, an intermediate period, a Middle Age. A clear correlation between an expressive form and the cultural history of power. When the idea of an art removed from the classical canons was postulated for the first time, there had been several centuries of controversy about the need for a *Stilwandel*, according to Gerhart Rodenwaldt (1935), of classical art: this change of style took

place around 170-200 AD. In that moment, the Empire, now under the Severan dynasty, felt obliged to distance itself from the values of the Antoninus era, discredited by the last descendant, Commodus, who of course betrayed the ideals of his father Marcus Aurelius. It was the starting point of a series of changes that would give way around 290 AD to a vigorous period in the history of art, not well recognised, and which Oldrich Pelikan calls “the art of Late Antiquity.” Therefore, there is not just a single rupture, but a succession of ruptures that lead from one art to another, from one aesthetic conception to another, where the legibility of nature was put into play, whether on a mythical basis sustained by the last productions of paganism or on a dogmatic basis, sustained by Christianity in its different and varied tendencies. Myth and dogma are two modes of knowledge, two procedures for articulating the social order and the artistic space.

What art was suitable for a world in full transformation that had started to question the moral sense of classical culture? Why were the stylistic norms that had made possible the Parthenon, the sculptures of Phidias, the Laocoön, the Pantheon of Rome or Trajan’s Column no longer valid? Such questions lead directly to the aesthetic debate from the late 3rd century. Lucien Jerphagnon writes about this: “The group of Tetrarchs in St Mark’s Square in Venice tells nothing of each of the emperors, their character, their feelings or, much less, their personal world. All that matters to the artist is the evocation of a certainty as firm as the stone that takes form: the unity of the four linked sovereigns, appearing throughout the Empire, and the implacable vigilance from which nobody escapes.” Art can still approach the sign of the greatness of Rome and its emperors; but can also conceive the possibility of ascending, in the *transcendens*, towards the representation of a God who lives outside the cosmos, whose son however became incarnate

to save man. Indeed, art can retain the face of that historical character called Christ who, from the origin, has been God Himself. How can this be done? By becoming “the coded expression of a formal symbolism,” as Wilhelm Worringer (1948) wrote.

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Let us take up the idea: the symbol in art is the sensorial transmutation of something spiritual. Its function is representative. When during the 3rd century art began to adopt symbols from Christian dogma, it did so in the classical style, but with the aim of not being subordinate to it. The indifference to the exactitude of anatomy was a sign of distinction. And this happened in the exact moment when in many regions of the Roman Empire (a pan-Mediterranean empire, let us not forget) the Church recovered from the persecution to which it had been subjected by some emperors inclined to hold back the pace of history. In this respect, it is important to note the surprising recognition of the Church in the 4th century as the support of the Empire; an idea of Constantine the Great to take power and which culminated in the battle of the Milvion Bridge. Later, there was a reaction from Julian, who was called the Apostate; but it was already too late for this. After his death, the Christian dogma clearly emerged and reached its height at the end of the century with Emperor Theodosius.

Devout and subject to the priests, Theodosius was no longer only concerned with political power, but was interested in the glories of the beyond. Around 395 he dared to pass decrees on the use of art. He effortlessly swept away at once all the resistances that wanted to maintain the classical style. Distancing from classical art meant inserting an iconography about Christ

in rich mosaics that adorned the walls of the basilicas. The aim was to support an art that would embrace the sacred aspects of dogma. It mattered little that some features still followed the processes of classical style, although gradually the naturalist image of the human body was substituted by a concise silhouette and a schematic face. The fleshless figures with their arbitrary clothes responded to a spirituality contrary to the body, as demonstrated by Peter Brown, although for decades (there are those who think for centuries) the ideals of classical style were maintained in the works of private use, but not in public art. The 20th century has made us familiar with the vision of different, even opposed, artistic forms, *isms* in short; something similar happened in the final stage at the end of the Roman Empire. Until when? This is exactly what is debated among the experts on the subject: the chronology of the resistance to classical style. In some details, it is true that it was never abandoned: it appears unexpectedly in the doorjamb of a church in the south of Italy, in a woman's head, in an ornamental capital. Anyone who goes to Ravello (Italy) will get a complete panorama of what I am saying. For a long time, the trend of keeping alive the classical past was a sign of distinction, which increased as the "barbarian" peoples, that is, those recently arrived from Germania and beyond, settled in the spheres of power with tastes that openly questioned the classical style. However, this new form of distinction was very soon recognised by the new masters of the world: the barbarians.

But, when the dogma impregnated the official art with its seal, and the classical style was relegated to the margins, to private taste, art had to confront theology. It was a great moment, above all because it coincided with two great phenomena of civilisation: the historical emergence of Islam, which developed its own art creating some original and fascinating works of art, and the iconoclastic movement

in Byzantium. The latter was the effect of the action of the Byzantine theologians, educated by Saint Maximus the Confessor, who suggested first disregarding the visual order represented by divinity and then prohibiting it by law, something finally done by Leo III in 730 by issuing an arbitrary edict that imposed iconoclasm. The policy introduced the need to destroy all icons ("idols"), the figurative images of the holy family, the saints, the martyrs and Christian bishops, the characters of the Old Testament and the living holy men. The iconoclasm movement to some extent supported the spirituality of art, in a line distant from but similar to that which in the early 20th century led Wassily Kandinsky to deny the figure and enter abstraction.

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"Colour, plane, rhythm, line: to investigate their capacities for autonomous expression; to receive the law and the meaning of formal creation and artistic expression only from them: here is the most intimate need of this *un-generated* art. Taken to its ultimate consequences, it thus becomes a formal art, purely abstract and absolute," wrote Wilhelm Worringer when reflecting upon the cultural issue provoked by the revolution of the artistic forms that led to the separation of icons from the work of art. In integrating the sacred of dogma, art seeks to avoid subjection to classical influence; it does not completely achieve this because style and taste impose a silent law that has marked the future of the works of art in the Mediterranean world for almost a thousand years, independently of the dominant cultural and religious territory. We see this equally in Coptic Egypt and Muslim Syria, in Byzantine Greece and the Spain

of the Umayyads or the Almohads, in the Maghreb of the Berber tribes and the Italy that flourished in Salerno, Pisa or Venice, as territories of the resistance that, in its turn, is dissidence. This is an interesting battle of ideas in their representative level, that is, as icons of a society and a culture, for which some procedures of analysis, not only iconographic but iconological, are necessary, according to Erwin Panofsky. This process therefore affects both the great works of art (architecture, sculpture, painting) and the objects that take on the representative values of the art to which they belong. The latter, however, have the advantage of their high mobility, of their constant transfer from one place to another, which in some way legitimates the transfer of visual forms, of style, which allows us to follow the traces of a constructive motif like the horseshoe arch, from the cities of the north of Syria to the Spanish cities of Toledo or Cordoba, or the traces of expressions on the human figure, which transfer the art of the mosaics of Constantinople to the mural paintings of the Valley of Boí, in the Pyrenees. Three reasons explain, in my view, the dissemination of the art that emerged in its sacred form in the Mediterranean world between the 6th and 16th centuries.

The first is the early maturity of inter-religious dialogue, more known for its debates and diatribes than for its lasting effects, which created secret nexuses between the different faiths of the Book. While iconoclasm in Byzantium and the feasibility of representing God in Islam was debated, artistic criteria continued to be proposed, which we see in numerous works and in magnificent objects: art continued but in another dimension that is, of course, also art. Is it perhaps a coincidence

that the most intense doctrinal debates, which took place in Cordoba between the 8th and 10th centuries, with the Mozarabs, had to do with the building of the Mosque by Abdur Rahman I and his followers? Let us keep in mind that the horseshoe arch is the key piece when creating an architectonic space where the sacred breathes.

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The second reason for the dissemination of art in its sacred form comes from the fact that in the Mediterranean an art that responded to the need for a reactivation of commercial life was firmly rooted, often barely visible, but which we know well in its first stages thanks to the documents of the Jewish community held in the Genizah¹ in Cairo. These documents show a common culture beyond the religious and political differences, which shared the same taste in silverware and marks of style that can be seen in the ornamentation, the maximum expression of the spiritual aspect of an art that seeks its own identity. The borders attract our attention because of their synchrony. It is known that a reading of these works of art, with the procedures proposed by Johannes Itten in his Bauhaus courses, brings us closer to a conception of the taste shared by millions of people from East to West, from North to South of the shores of the Mediterranean. The two best examples of this meeting of forms and tastes are the Villa Rufolo, in the Italian city of Ravello, and the Alhambra, in Granada. Two vigorous syntheses of a way of understanding art that clarifies the historical

1. Set of manuscripts found in the 19th century in the synagogue of Ben Ezra in Cairo, which constitute the most complete documentation discovered to date about a medieval society.

process in the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages: a movement of multiple meetings, at diverse levels of reality, open to the creations of the Other. Hence it was easy to apply it to the Spanish plateresque or the early Italian baroque.

Lastly, the third reason: the expression of the sacred in the works of art in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages is explained by the vigour of the artisanal production in many cities and by the development of the trade networks that transferred with ease the products of one region to another. Together with raw materials and spices, which sustained a revolution in table manners, we must note the expansion of a sumptuary art that ranged from the fork, that great invention of the time, to the water jugs. All these objects, sometimes with exotic figures, represented the search for the wonderful that nature still conserved, as Jean de Meun said in the middle of a serious controversy about the symbolic dimension of silverware.

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The concern with maintaining this art passed from the Mediterranean to Russia, specifically the monastery of Optina Pustyn in the meadows of the river Zhizdra, close to the city of Kozelsk, in the province of Kaluga, around two hundred kilometres south of Moscow. And there it was conserved like a good linked to the soul of a people. When thinking about this place, Chekhov, in his short story *Easter Eve* (1886), said that it conveyed the emphasis on the mystical *experience* of God, which forged the best of the cultural meeting possible through an open, positive and tolerant reading of religion. The dialogue that art shows is precisely a creative tension

on the limits of one society and another, of one religion and another, of one culture and another.

The works of art passed from one hand to another fairly easily and assiduously; it was not an art market in the strict sense but was practised as such in the desire for reproduction. It was the Mediterranean world that conceived the scope of xylography as an element of vulgarisation of works of art long before the same was done with writing through printing. We see the accentuation of two trends during the 13th and 14th centuries: the laicisation of art and the conversion of the object into an artistic reason. Both trends developed to the detriment of the values that had linked art, and the works of art, with the world of the sacred administered by the men of religion. The objective of these processes was similar to that of the escapist literature that captivated society and were easily transferable from one culture to another – in this respect it is worth citing the example of *Tales of Count Lucanor* by Don Juan Manuel –, that is, to give more strength to artistic interrelation throughout the Mediterranean. And all this was possible largely because in the post-classical era they managed to capture the festive, happy, background of a universe that exists close to the sacred but does not directly form part of it. Seemingly, many 15th century mural paintings had this desire of showing the *plaisir* aspects of society. Thus, they were created in the same way in the Castello della Manta in the Piedmont, close to the marquises of Saluzzo, as in the Hall of the Kings of the Alhambra in Granada, close to the Nasrid emirs. These works of art were completely impregnated with mundane values. They were the vehicle of the high educational function of a political elite that we see equally in Syria with the Ayyubids, and in Egypt with the Mamelukes; in Granada with the Nasrids, and in the Christian merchant republics of

Venice, Florence or Genoa. But, suddenly, the value of the mimesis in human behaviour was reconsidered. This readjustment returned to classical style its educational power and made it, in mid-15th century Italy, a man-centred humanistic art.

With the arrival of the Renaissance, an artistic era ended that could be classified as post-classical: an era marked out by grandiose works of art, whose emotion upon looking at them is the same that the great medievalist Georges Duby felt at the end of his life before the painting of Zao Wou-Ki, and about which he wrote in 1996 (the same year of his death): “Do not all those who admire him have the feeling of wandering through his painting, as if through fabulous landscapes, of venturing from one marvel to another? Captured, transported from the real to the unreal, from the visible to the indescribable. In joy.” I believe I see in this commentary a profound melancholy in my master: anyone who thinks this way about a current painter wishes to understand the possibilities of art far from classical aesthetics. The search for a meaning for works of art from the 9th to 15th centuries is the path to achieve this, perhaps not the only one but certainly the most authentic.

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