

The lecture on the Social Meaning of Art was also delivered at the Teatro Verdi, in Montevideo, on 12 September 1947 , to accompany the arrival of the show from Buenos Aires and presented at the Salão da Comissão Nacional de Belas-Artes. In November 1947, the text was published by Ediciones del Centro Estudiantes de Bellas Artes, in Buenos Aires. The lecture was recently published again in the catalogue accompanying "Exposición Portinari" (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, Jul.-Sept. 2004) and in the book Candido Portinari y el sentido social del arte, edited by Andrea Giunta (Buenos Aires: Siglo-XXI Editores Argentina, 2005).

Although the text was translated into Portuguese and published in Época magazine (November 1947), in Rio de Janeiro, with poems by Rafael Alberti e Nicolás Guillén, neither the original manuscript nor a press clipping could be found in the Portinari Project archive. This is why the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo decided to translate it from Spanish, even though this would be a "translation of a translation". Some of the ideas aired in the 1947 lecture were also published by Ibiapaba de Oliveira Martins in his article "O abstracionismo já foi superado" [Abstractionism is already a thing of the past], in Artes Plásticas (São Paulo, v. I, n. 3, Jan.-Feb. 1949).

My dear friends:

First of all, I would like to apologize and explain why I am speaking in Portuguese. First, because, if I spoke in Spanish, you would be the first to ask me to switch to Portuguese, because that way you would understand something, while, if I spoke in Spanish, you would understand nothing. Our two languages are brothers, like our two countries, and that is why, when you come to my country, we prefer you to speak your own language, because I believe that Argentina and Brazil form a single country. We Brazilians feel at home here in Argentina and would like you to feel the same in Brazil.

When a group of young people asked me to de-

liver a lecture here, I couldn't turn them down. In fact, I should have done, because painters were not born to speak, but to paint. Painting is my way of expressing myself, not speaking. I am reminded of what Poussin, the great French painter, wrote to a friend: "I have spent more than forty years practicing a silent art form and, when I have to speak, I feel extremely awkward". And that's how I feel now. Those who find this talk too long are free to nod off or leave the room, without apologizing or asking permission. For those who think it is too short, I would be happy to talk more about the subject on a later occasion.

Social art is the subject that was chosen for this talk, but I am not a specialist in this subject, I am not that qualified to talk about it in great depth. Nevertheless, I'll do my best to get to the end without digressing too much from this theme. It is a subject about which much has been written and spoken and remains the focus of unending debate.

I would like to clear up a few points by way of explanation. One is the question of the intrinsic quality of painting, whose value no one can deny. First of all, let us examine the concepts of the spirit of the work of art and the technique used to produce it, without thereby meaning to separate these two things that are impossible to separate. The two are Siamese twins; one cannot exist without the other, but it is still possible to examine each separately. The spiritual content of a painting registers the artist's capacity for sensibility. The technical side concerns the artist's know-how and the way he develops his sensibility. The technique is the means by which the artist transmits his sensibility.

For the sake of simplicity, I will express this in a rather arbitrary way. I will divide sensitivity into two categories: one I will call artistic sensibility and the other public sensibility. Artistic sensibility is felt generally speaking - by those who are born and raised on it. They learn it in museums, at talks and so forth. This is why those who are interested in painting take the trouble to demand that the government address this issue and this is how things should be. Right now, I am here because a group of young people believes that in this medium, the talks, is useful in this way. A few days ago, I was looking at the murals of some of the greatest Argentinean painters and I commented that this work is the best proof of

why the government allows them to use its walls. In this way, they are also fulfilling an educational role.

To continue in this arbitrary fashion as a way of facilitating expression, I believe that it is possible to test, or better, measure artistic sensibility. For example, using two colors: red and green. We all know that a color has a million different tones. We will begin to show these two colors in their natural state and then we will gradually modify them, adding different hues. Up to the point where the viewer recognizes these colors and his sensibility is registered. A person who was born with sensibility experiences a certain emotion before a painting, but these are privileged beings. Hence the difficulty that the general public has with certain works of art. In recent years, as a reaction to purely circumstantial works, groups of painters have emerged who have produced and continue to produce paintings that can be described as art for art's sake. This is and has always been a normal occurrence throughout history. As is well known, one school of painting always emerges in reaction against another. All human beings are made up-chemically speaking - of different percentages of things in the world; this is why we can say that there are people who were born with the sensibility necessary to produce and have a feeling for painting. This does not mean that other people have no sensibility whatsoever, but that they were born with a minimal sensibility with regard to painting. And it is by incorporating accessible elements that painting will come to interest a larger number of people.

Another consideration should be borne in mind. Neither circumstantial painting nor painting for painting's sake are enough to attract the masses. Perhaps only a combination of the two can achieve this end.

There are painters who claim that, simply by painting a cube and a sphere they are producing advanced art. This kind of thinking is somewhat rudimentary. This cube and this sphere, if painted by a painter

with technical know-how and sensibility will be converted into a work of art, just as a nude would

be. If painted by a painter with no technique or sensibility, this would result in a painting of no artistic value. So, I believe that the subject matter has little to do with what makes a work of art.

It is clear that all of this is relative, but only up to a point; one shouldn't see more tragedy in a Kandinsky painting, for example, than in a Goya firing squad. Just as there are no human beings who are five meters or two centimeters tall. If we think in terms of extremes, we will rapidly fall into chaos.

It would be better for a human being who paints with and possesses common sensibility but lacks artistic sensibility, to go directly to the public square and say what he feels in ordinary language than to express himself visually. As I have said, social painting is a kind of painting that is directed towards the masses and the kind of painters who produce it should have both artistic and common sensibility. Both should be taught and, in the case of the first, I have already said which means I believe to be the most appropriate.

I think that the second kind of sensibility can be developed by consorting with the masses, and listening to their wishes. Everyone has, to a greater or a lesser extent, some kind of sensibility or other; it is clear that those who have shown in their lives that they have a calling should be taught to take action. A painter is not a social painter because he wants to be, but because of his sensibility and education (although it is a little ironic to call living and suffering with the people an education, but I use this word for reasons of simplification and not to digress from the main issue that we are dealing with here). I am well aware that, in order to explore this issue in sufficient depth, it would be necessary to write various books, but I only want to say more or less what I think about social art and also to make it clear that I do not intend to be here to teach 'in a professorial manner'. This is just a conversation among friends.

The development of any human activity and the direction it takes are related to historical, political and economic events. What is a fair

consideration today may cease to be so tomorrow. We live in a world full of contradictions, in which the artist, because he is highly sensitive, suffers enormously.

Wherever you go, everyone is suffering and fighting for their world, more for emotional than rational reasons; it is clear that one only reasons because one is driven by some kind of emotion, but, in general, what happens is that we only hear the voice of emotion, instead of hearing feeling through the voice of reason.

If we put an artist in a room where there is only a single object—a telephone, for example—after some time he will find some beauty in this telephone; this beauty will have something to do with his artistic sensibility and, even though he has common sensibility, this will be cut off from its normal milieu and will thus be overpowered and overcome by his artistic sensibility and the artist will cry out with the voice of feeling in defense of that beauty.

Beauty is like a kingdom full of wars and death. Whenever there is a war or a death, these are attributed to a variety of causes. In Europe, where there has been much speculation about the nature of beauty, this has reached an extreme and painting has completely exhausted its resources. This is why figurative painting has been increasingly marginalized. All such concerns come from the bourgeois-led social regime, which is already breaking down. And, for this reason, revolutionary, and hence more advanced, circles are looking to figurative painting for their means of expression. However, as the decadent bourgeoisie is still the prevailing force, there is a struggle between abstract and figurative painting. This discussion is at present the main preoccupation of artistic circles in Europe, especially Paris, which is still the intellectual center of the world.

However, there is a lot of confusion surrounding figurative art, since there are many who take figurative to mean imitation and believe in a

return to the academy. In fact, figurative artists do not defend a return to the past, because, if they did, they would not be revolutionaries. What they want is to go beyond what has already been done, taking on board all the achievements, and move forward. In every case, the debate remains heated and each group fiercely defends its point of view. This dispute always existed, but

what in fact puts an end to these debates are changes of regime, or rather, it is these that bring about real concrete change. On the other hand, these changes only occur through struggle and much fighting. Or, to put this better: there is struggle at every time in human life, and, when most of these sectors coincide, change occurs. This is when one takes a broad view of the field of human debate. Seen in any other way, people fall into individualism, which means that they feel things in relation to themselves and their petty personal problems, which blinds them. The regimes dominate all fields of life, including art.

It is interesting, for example, to note that in Latin America, not only is there more discussion of social art, but there are also more artists who practice it. Most of these countries are semi-feudal and semi-colonial. However, social difference is more visible and, as art education is less well developed, the artist has more of a latent common sensibility. Murals are the most appropriate form of social art, because walls are usually public and, at the same time, tell a story, and therefore interest a larger number of people. Two results can be achieved through this medium: art education and public education.

We should not lose sight of the role that painting plays in our age, in which art has incorporated photography and cinema. Both impose insuperable barriers, in certain cases, and, when artists try to invade their territory, they produce poor quality work. I do not mean to say by this that cinema and photography are second-rate art forms. In my view, all the arts have the same potential. None is superior or inferior to the others. But each has its own field of action. A practicing artist may elevate his genre or not, depending on the ability of the artist, not on the genre itself. But, I repeat, each has its own field of action: when an artist strays into another field, he faces bitter defeat. Obviously, he still has certain qualities; these do not go away. It is as if a great runner were to

run a three-meter race: you could see that he is a great runner, but he would not have the means at his disposal to show it properly. There was a time when a painting functioned more as an historical document than as a work of art and it is interesting that most of these paintings have an extraordinary artistic value, even though this would appear to be a contradiction, since, if we look carefully at the paintings of this kind that have been produced in the period since the emergence of photography and the cinema, we will arrive at the conclusion that ninety percent of these paintings are entirely devoid of value, even historical value. This once again proves that the importance of the subject matter is very relative. In times gone by, the artist's view of human beings may have been purer and there may have been a more accurate understanding of the function of painting. There was no obligation to imitate. Artists represented a figure or a landscape without falling into imitation. We can see, for example, Byzantine decorations, where the artist presents a figure with a green head and red feet and does not expect his contemporaries to be scandalized by this, as happens when this occurs nowadays. These figures were not being represented in purely objective terms, but also spiritually. For this reason, I argue that subject matter may lead to something visually interesting, depending on how one portion or other of the painting is executed, and this is an abstraction of the subject matter being represented. But, above all, it must excite the interest of the general public. Nowadays, since the general public has usually not been taught to appreciate art, they are basically only interested if the painting tells them something that lies outside of art, and this can little by little draw them into the world of art.

Apart from its collective nature, which is the most important thing for me, I believe that it is possible to arrive at a purely aesthetic kind of education through this means, since the viewer is drawn directly into the painting, without the need for explanations. On the contrary, when museums or exhibitions aim to force some kind of art form into the heads of the general public, for somewhat abstruse reasons, it produces no results whatsoever, except for, in most cases, creating a bunch of snobs. The artist should provide the public the opportunity to come to his

painting without needing to furnish verbal explanations of what this or that color means.

Everything that is produced accords with the intention behind it. For example: if I produce something that is for the people, sooner or later it will reach the people. If the people aren't capable of this at the moment, they will be in the future. If I do something without any intention whatsoever, it will disappear into oblivion.

It is often said that the world is full of good intentions, but we need to know where these good intentions are going. Where we direct our actions and whether we achieve the desired results, depends on our capacity for discernment. There is thus only one truth; were this not the case, I could pay off a thousand pesos debt with a single peso, saying that I intend this one peso to stand in for a thousand.

Everything in the world, even the most abstract things, can be measured and weighed; the important thing is to find the right weights and measurements. If an artist aims to direct his work towards the masses, even if he does this in a complicated fashion, one day he will be understood.

There can be no doubt that if someone wants us to say that a circle he has painted on a canvas represents a weeping child, this artist will meet with a world that wants to say it is a public square. The best we can say of him is that he has good intentions, but is incompetent and, worse still, dishonest. In visual terms, there is freedom to the ways in which one may express oneself. There are thousands of ways of representing a weeping child. Just as when you say something it can be said in a serious or a sharp tone, in a soft or loud voice, or whatever. What matters is what was said.

It is a fairly elastic limit. Everything has a beginning and an end, but this beginning and this end are transformed enormously within the confines of some kind of logic in order not to collapse into chaos and lead to a dangerous game. It is like when people say that there is no point changing the circumstances of those who are dying of starvation, because, they say, they will be unhappy outside of their environment. It is the kind of argument made by those who despise any kind of change.

To me it is very clear that a painting should, above all, have intrinsic value, that is artistic value. Many will find it absurd to expect more than this from a painting. An artist spends his whole life struggling with his artistic problems and it is not fair to ask any more from him, since subject matter will only serve to lead him astray. I am well aware that this is the fundamental problem for an artist, but, when he paints, he is always representing something that goes beyond the art. All artists know that the subject doesn't matter. This is why it is not too much to ask the painter to incorporate this detail, which he has accorded such little importance, in his painting, since it is something that goes beyond art. For the good of those who undergo suffering in life, in all its forms.

I am sure that this is also for the good of the work of art, because it adds something useful to it. The subject matter that Goya deals with, for example, positively screams out of the canvas; it makes an incredible visual impression, but this does not detract from its value as a work of art. In no way, does this make it inferior as a work of art to the best that has been done in the field of abstract painting.

I see no reason for intransigent abstention from subject matter. Especially nowadays, when we can take advantage of a whole range of visual experiences, when an artist has absolute freedom, like a four-year-old boy with a thousand-meter squared canvas to play with. Any artist who reflects on the events that are shaking the world will conclude that, if he makes his paintings more "legible", they will gain more than they lose. And they will gain a lot, because they will receive the blessing of the people.

I know that artists who turn in on themselves are the ones who suffer most; but, unfortunately, this suffering leads nowhere and benefits no one.

There are those who believe that they can express tragedy or joy in a painting merely by using a particular color. I agree with them, but these are trivial feelings that only a few privileged souls are sensitive to. This artist, who is able to elicit such a feeling merely with a color, could expand his range and direct himself towards the masses. Such cases force us to divide sensibility into two categories: the artistic

and the public. All artists are endowed with a large measure of both. For a thousand different reasons, in various artists, one kind of sensibility alone prevails and undermines the other.

The painters who want to produce social art and the lovers of the beauty of painting for painting's sake are those who do not forget that they have been put into this world full of injustice to side with the common people and listen to their needs. The social painter believes he is the messenger of the people, the mouthpiece of their feelings and desires. He yearns for peace, justice and liberty. He believes that human beings can share in the pleasures of the universe. They can hear the singing of the birds. They can see the waters flowing in the river that fertilize the soil. They can look up at the starry sky and breathe the sunny early morning air, thinking of nothing but fraternity and peace, living in a world where justice prevails, where children are not left to starve, where people enjoy rights. Where there are no grieving mothers or old people dying out in the open.