

Wolfgang Paalen, Introduction to Form and Sense, 1945

Though written by a painter, this book does not teach how to paint; it tries to bring about a better understanding of why it is worthwhile to paint. Taking for granted that one does not paint for good or bad reasons, but that one instead is moved by an impulse prior in existence to conscious reasons, it remains that today great natural gifts are lost in sterile efforts, unless the artist becomes conscious of his aims. As long as art had a well defined and generally accepted function in the pattern of a coherent social life, the artist was provided with a specific subject matter, his only worry was over how to paint, not what to paint. But today there is, on the one hand, a more comprehensive knowledge of the history of art and of pictorial techniques than ever before; and, on the other, a complete confusion over the ends which might be achieved by such a wealth of means. In brief, the problem of how to paint cannot any longer be separated from the problem of what to paint. A given subject matter today exists only for imitative tendencies, and for the mouthpieces of propaganda and advertising. But the problem of subject matter has become crucial for all those who attempt to find in their art a general human significance.

I do not pretend to have readymade answers to this question, or to all the others raised by every serious discussion of the subject. I attempt merely to indicate the lines along which answers might be found, by putting the question correctly. This can be done only by getting art out of the no-man's land of metaphysics, by dissociating metaphysics and imagination once and for all.

The following chapters consist of a series of articles which first appeared in the magazine *Dyn*. Though at first glance they may seem to be repetitious, I believe they actually present different and complementary facets of thought. The initial chapter, which deals especially with the position of the artist in our time, might just as well be called *Artist and Society*. *On the Meaning of Cubism Today* discusses the problem of subject matter. In *The New Image* is developed (for the first time, as far as I know) an objective criterion for distinguishing between progressive and retrogressive tendencies in art. *Surprise and Inspiration* gives a working hypothesis for understanding the mysterious phenomenon that we call inspiration; this chapter perhaps shows best what I mean by dissociating imagination from metaphysics: how I intend to show the vital role of art without making the usual arbitrary distinction between "material" and "spiritual" phenomena. Arbitrary distinctions between such badly defined entities as matter and spirit, psychical and physical, form and content, have been historically necessary steps in the conceptual evolution of thought. But they are now obsolete. Every new creation in art has a value of meaning-no matter to what extent its plastic terms can be readily translated into verbal terms. Since reality can be satisfactorily defined only as the synthesis of perception and interpretation – the formative power which manifests itself in the intuitive coordination of chosen elements cooperates in the very making of reality. My intention thus is to show that not only the forms given to us by the external world but likewise the forms freely created by art generate sense. In other words, that forms have a meaningfulness without the understanding of which there can be no full understanding of our world in terms of human values.

There is no true work of art without a deep meaningfulness - but meaningfulness need not mean straightforward intelligibility. Why should works of art be easy to understand in a world in which nothing is easy to understand? Paintings no longer represent; it is no longer the task of art to answer naive questions. Today it has become the role of the painting to look at the spectator and ask him: what do you represent?