

Leonardo Ricci

The Function of Art in Contemporary Life (1952)

Unpublished typescript of a lecture Ricci held in 1952, during his first stay in the United States, when he held a cycle of conferences about the synthesis of the arts. The conferences were addressed to the students and scholars of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Southern California and Brooklyn University in New York, and to the students and scholars of the Department of Philosophy of the Washington Catholic University.

In this text Ricci analyses the figure of the artist, in its existential dimension, and gives his definition of art. Ricci expresses the function of art in the life of contemporary men after having dealt with the relationship of men with God across time and different civilizations. The aims are to define the role of the artist and his relationship to the contemporary society as well as the relation of painting with architecture. The document belongs to the holdings kept in Casa Studio Ricci.

What has the painter told us from the origin until today?

It would be most interesting to follow the history of man through the history of painting, and to see step by step what men thought and expressed about the world. Others have tried to do this, still others will try to do it.

During this lecture, it will be enough to give you a rapid glance. The first men as we can see from the most ancient testimony, were very impressed by themselves. The imprints of their hands on the walls of the caves tell us something similar to our first impressions as children in front of the mirrors: astonishment. Not necessarily fear but necessarily wonder.

Then they were touched by movement. Running animals, men fighting beasts. Rather than expressing things in relation, they expressed outside life without any personal opinion. They looked at the facts and nothing else.

From the first evident observations, they passed to more complex ones: to be born, to die, to regenerate. And then, monsters of pregnant women, men with fallus, funereal masks.



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It is curious to observe (as we can still see in some savage art) that while the domination of the external form of nonhuman things was an easy and natural process to them, the human form led them to a more difficult problem; not because the human form is much more difficult to reproduce, but because the question of the reason for life was born in them. We have proof of this from the coloured prehistoric graphic designs.

Little by little, through the insistence of asking, they looked for answers.

Fleetingly, this is what they found.

The Indians said that the world is something complex and mysterious as is the jungle, that God is very strong and powerful, and almighty, that a woman's sex is something dark and in it is hidden the mystery of life. That men eat, stay together, and make children. That men have not only two arms and one face but many arms and many faces. This is not only due to research of movement, but to try and find, subconsciously, a fourth dimension. The world is dynamic and only from the contrast of the elements comes life, be it material or metaphysical.

The Chinese, more astute, tried to make a friend of God. They contemplated his beautiful robes; suns which rose and set, flowers and plants of paradise. The small relationship of men to the infinite. Graceful and harmonious relationships between men. As for evil, and the things which result from it, dragons and demons were their cause. From these they defended themselves by sorcery like from a taboo.

The Egyptians, more intellectual, living in a more deserted and absolute environment which is less animistic, speak to us of afterlife. That life is a function of death, so that we, the living, have to prepare for us, the dead. That men are nothing other than a predetermined movement with a pointed finger toward an end that we do not see but can sense. That cosmic rhythm and harmony reflects itself on man.

Other people, like the Hebrews, say that God is absolute and deppotent,¹ master, with whom we cannot compete, so that they abstain from representing him.

Others like the Arabs, created rhythm form and colours, but for analogous reasons, did not enter into the testimony of the consciousness of things through painting.

Others, like the Persians, nearer spiritually to the ancient lunar cults, told us of a more feminine life, one more concerned with fantasy.

Coming nearer to us there are the Greeks, wiser people and speculators, patronising God. They call him down from Olympus, sometimes on to the earth. Invite him to stay with the men, sleep with the women, besides generate.

Sometimes the men climb to Olympus. Consequently there is their man so armonious perfect and ideal, even if deprived of internal single preoccupation.

¹ This word does not exist in English. It could be "potent" here.

That would mean a determined man and not undetermined. A man with stomachache or without stomachache, which does not mean the same.

The Romans, more practical, similar in many ways to some modern men, made of God a figure of the State for the people "ludi et circenses" (that means "amuse and satiate yourselves") without worrying too much about metaphysics. But sometimes they stuck to things more human, and moving, and nearer to life, such as family portraits.

Afterwards Christianity came.

God escaped from the hands of men, hid himself in inaccessible altitudes but at the same time he became a man in natural contact with men. So that the first christian artists found themselves in an odd situation. On the one hand a world of forms marvellously organised and defined which gave to them the means of expression. On the other hand a world broken and abyssal, as much toward the sky as toward the earth, to be completely lost.

There was the problem of sadness, an other sadness, that of secret feelings, and over all the problem of charity.

How to express themselves?

There was a certain interruption. Afterwards the manifestations began.

The form was a new one.

The fact, for instance, that a Roman or Gothic statue have a form dynamic, broken, contorted, confronted to one Greek statue, composed, harmonic, static, does not mean that a new esthetic law, intellectually aprioristic, has inspired the first christian artists. But it means that their believing was changed and in consequence the forms had taken a new expression.

So that it makes me laugh that they who consider the ideal of beauty the Greek, or eventually the Renaissance. And also it makes me laugh that they who consider the Greek pagan and consequently as the only beauty the christian².

Indeed the form bears directly from its organic drive, such as the peartree assumes the form of a peartree and a pine the form of a pine and a figtree the form of a figtree. And it is stupid to say if it is more beautiful the form of a pine or the form of a figtree. The most I can say is, "now I love the pine because in this moment I love something which forces me to look into the sky, or, now I love a figtree because it is more near to the ground, more in contact with me. It is sufficient to raise my hand and I can taste its sweet fruits."

Also the christian period has had its different fruits, such as the other which I could not analyse. But for the reason that it is nearer to us as tradition I will try to put some firm points also to facilitate the understanding of modern movements.

² This periphrasis is not clear. It could be rephrased as follows: "So it makes me laugh that they consider the ideal of beauty the Greek, or eventually the Renaissance. And also it makes me laugh that they consider the Greek pagan and consequently as the only beauty the christian."

I have already mentioned the Roman and the Gothic and, making an extension, the Byzantine.

All three currents bear from this desire to break the limits of man, to project him beyond death, to put him in contact with God. If after one uses a means, another and another one, it is only a question of methodology, of quality and quantity but not of real and true direction.

There was then a world of fights between christians and pagans. The time of mysticism was not far away. Painting was the expression used by a man to dominate and to win his own body, to liberate his own soul beyond the clouds.

Already Giotto and then Masaccio, that is to say, those of the pre-Renaissance, say to themselves: "What is all this. After all Christ was not so different from us. And the Virgin neither. And the women are beings who generate. And the men people who work and earn their day's³ bread."

Certainly the form changes. Instead of arabesques, of vertical rhythms, of precious colours, simpler forms are used, more geometrical, which can contain hearts, lungs and entrails instead of fire which burns. More natural colours: blue sky, as the sky is generally seen, green trees and the earth the colour of the earth.

But who sees and speaks only of stylistic values is very far from understanding the language of painting, because he confuses the means with the end. Indeed in a man, after contemplating the work of art and after the disappearance of the object before the eyes, in last analysis only this has to remain: something richer or poorer, something which has become his own or which remains estranged, something which makes him understand life better or which is useless to him, something which permits him an easier contact with the others or which divides him and leaves no trace.

Proceeding, we can take other points.

In the Renaissance we see very different personalities. There a man revolts himself against his generic "brother" and looks for a precise "brother". Michelangelo, even if he works in the boundaries of a church, puts question after question. And his questions are stronger than his answers. Leonardo is the first human being who lives problematically. And in this connection I wish to open a parenthesis. This year I have heard many lectures about Leonardo. This year was in fact his fifth centenary. Lectures made by painters, critics and philosophers and so forth. I have heard speak of him in many ways. But I have never heard speak⁴ of him as to me seems more correct. Because Leonardo, contrary to what is normally said, that he is a universal genius, capable in every field, he is for me a man who is unaccomplished in everything. He discovered nothing exact. He was not a poet. He was not an architect. He was not a philosopher. Even in the field in which today he is most considered, in painting,

3 "Daily" would be the appropriate word here.

4 Here and above: "Speaking" would be the appropriate word.

we can speak of bankruptcy. There remain few paintings, most of which are incomplete. During his own life-time, confronted by other painters, he was not very esteemed. What then remains of him if not this extreme and gigantic failure? But is not this perhaps his greatest value? But is not perhaps this manner of living the first conscious effort to live problematically? I would even say in an existential manner? The critics say that Leonardo da Vinci has discovered the "sfumato" (which means infinitely graded light). But let's not kid ourselves. This is the reason he made the "sfumato": that when he walked over those same hills of Florence that Giotto and other Florentines had crossed, when he took into his hands a fossil seashell, it was not a mere stone for him, or a joke of nature or a curiosity, but to him it meant the sea. Do you understand? The sea. The sea on terra ferma⁵. Do you understand now, the why of his submarine light in his paintings? Do you understand why he adored that wet crepuscular light?

And now that I have mentioned Leonardo's name I want to place another milestone over him by saying that he is the man who brought into the open the crisis, the same crisis in which modern man finds himself and against which he tries to defend himself: that is if we wish to give an simple and uncomplicated meaning to the word crisis.

Indeed, if it is true that following Leonardo there were many painters like El Greco the Spaniard or Venetians like Tintoretto or Tiziano who worked already in the ambiente of Christianity, with an exact notion of the meaning of faith, it is also true that the research of the painters began to change direction. From the religious subjects we pass to those of a more human order. In reality, a more precise analysis of life began and men started to ask themselves about things which until then had been considered solved.

So that the confirmation that Kirkegarde⁶ makes in the "..."⁷ to be no more possible to men to have the faith of Abraham, had been long before defined by Leonardo also if the terms were different.

To go out from faith, to go out from an operant Christianity meant to look for other values, which found different formal expressions. Either Caravaggio found life in the life of the people or Rubens found life in erotism and sensuality, the fact is that little by little the artists searched artificial paradises to express. Also if these artificial paradises often belong to that world of rhetoric which we detest today. World of rhetoric which reached its culminating point in the 19th century and which determined the revolution of the impressionist artists.

There has been so much talk about this revolution that it seems useless to insist. Useless to find who were the first. If Monticelli or Turner were the forefathers, and so on.

The fact is that at a certain moment some artists had enough of everything.

5 "Mainland" would be the English word for terraferma.

6 "Kierkegaard" would be the appropriate word here.

7 Ricci leaves this void also in the original typescript.

They had enough of all kinds of rhetorics, of all kinds of believing of all kinds of morality, and approximatively they said: "Until today they have told us of all the sauces and until today we believed them. Now enough. We see the nature. We see the sun and the light of the sun. We see trees and rivers. We see objects and things. Life is made by these things and these things we express. If these things have poetry and justify our life, well, otherwise patience."

At last this big revolution was nothing else than to try and be more humble and true and simple, and instead of revolutionary painters we could talk of good people who tried to be nearer to the natural order of things.

But also this had a short time.

The world of apparent form does not satisfy men. What interests them is what is hidden behind the form, of which the form is only the megaphone. So that very soon this was no longer sufficient, and with Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin a new period begins.

These three were the fundamental painters of the modern era. There were three victories and three failures.

There were three victories because all three revolted against society, searched a new religious position in life, which they manifested through new form. There were three failures because all three lived desperately and died desperately without achieving what they sought.

Their letters bear witness to this, and we could look into some fundamental points which would however, at this point, carry us too far.

There is nothing under the sun which is definite and new. The steps which man marks on earth are slow and difficult to achieve. So that, basically, the three painters did not invent a new world, but rather put a more profound accent on certain aspects and rendered them more tangible.

For Cezanne the problem was this: to see the world built harmoniously and mathematically through geometric construction in a somewhat Pythagoric way. However, he did this directly and not through a process of reflection.

For Van Gogh the problem was this: to see the world as a manifestation of charity, in which all objects are living things, in direct communication with one another. He was the nearest to the Christian reality expressed by St. Paul: "The whole creation is waiting".

For Gauguin the problem was: to see the world free of all bourgeois concepts, more savage and animal, bound closer to the sacredness of each act of life, even if in the last analysis he was bound to take refuge in a myth.

The first of these three lived alone. Married, with children, but alone as a dog. The second, after a desperate life, killed himself with a revolver. The third died syphilitic in Tahiti.

As you see they paid dearly for their revolt; we cannot say for certain that their life was organic.

After them, things became more complicated. They opened such large roads - from the most romantic and the most expressionistic visions of life to the more classical and formalistic - that the painters who succeeded them had a very large field for research.

Modigliani, Soutine, Raoult, Chagall, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klee...

Fauvism, cubism, expressionism, futurism, surrealism, abstractism, neoplasticism...

Isms. All isms. It is very true that many isms are not radical but many are. So that each of these movements has an approximate date of birth, parents, and an evolution which it is not possible for me to examine now. The problem remains fundamentally the same: What do these painters say to us? What do the painters of recent past generations say to us, and those still alive today, not to speak of the younger ones, for whom it is best to let some time pass to have a better perspective.

Since I am not a systematic man, nor a philosopher, nor a critic, but only an artist, I would like to express myself by reading part of a letter which I wrote to a very well-known critic whose name I prefer not to mention for reasons of discretion, and whom I may call a friend:

"What do the painters of today fundamentally say to me? It is not easy to judge, to express, and above all to be brief. But I shall try to put it in a letter.

There are those who say to me that the world is made of monsters, that it is an absurdity and a madness.

There are those that say that the world is made of little coloured points.

Those who say that the reality of man is only found in escape, such as in morphine or opium.

There are those who say there is colour, rhythm, form.

There are those who say the world is a publicity poster.

The more honest say to me that the world is a problem. Still others say they understand nothing of the world. For some it is a game, for others a trick, and so on.

Cries, tears, vomiting, horror, madness, in short everything which is a part of life stops on the canvases of painters who more or less honestly try to fix the reality of man in relation to today and today's life.

The conclusion is that we live in a period of transition, confusion and crisis.

Crisis, crisis, crisis!

And I don't know one honest painter who, underneath whims, apparent

tricks, big words, does not feel himself in a crisis. I? Also I, after having passed the dilettante⁸ and youthful period, I have been swept along with the current. Also I have painted the world in small points, in rectangles, in circles. Also I have done almost the same as the others.

Swept by the current, yes, but I wanted to know why. Ask me: But then, what do you think, what do you want to express? You know my paintings.

What I was able to express is there; I cannot judge. But I would like to say this:

“That man is born, lives, and dies.”

“That life is important because death exists.”

“That life is useful because death does not interrupt the reality of a man.”

“That all we do is part of a final aim which we do not know but of which we can intuitively sense the reality.”

“That on the earth there are women men children animals trees flowers mountains seas rivers.”

“That in the sky there are stars, sun and moon.”

“That all this is only apparent because it will die, but through this we can perceive what will remain.”

Practically:

That we have to learn to know, understand and love.

That suffering exists because we surpass our limits and do not realise the living reality of the one next to us.

That man and woman must study one another, understand one another, be integrated with each other. Finally, that life is organic and we have to live it.

How can I express this through paintings?...?..?

The letter goes on in this way, but I shall stop here.

I perfectly realise that I am before an audience, and above all an audience accustomed to logic. What I said may seem more or less poetical, more or less metaphysical, or more or less built of air. I dont think so, I think on the contrary it is good to have put you in the presence of an artist whose interest is life and nothing else.

I will try, in conclusion, to give you some more technical and exact elements.

I will not enter into the present problem of society, the relation of the artist to this society, the relation of painting with architecture, other urgent problems for the artist which I cannot analyse now.

I will only stress some points.

8 “Dabbler” would be the English word for “dilettante”.

In so far as the contents are concerned, my position is this. I live. I sleep. I am awake.

When I sleep the world is temporarily away from me. Also, if the intimate and secret life goes on, I am however not aware of it.

When I am awake, I am in the world. I see the things made by nature, and those made by man. I can become aware of them. Let me see what is of interest to me and what I am interested in expressing.

I don't care to express the world as it appears. I know well that to a fly which has other eyes from mine the world looks entirely different. I don't care about expressing this apparent world whether it is naturalistic, impressionistic, or truistic⁹.

I don't care to say that the sun is red or that the shadows from things are coloured.

I don't want to make politics through art nor preach morals.

I don't care to say that the poor suffer, that there are rich bourgeois. Generally, I don't care to narrate chronical facts such as that Christ died on the cross or that Napoleon wins a battle or what the effects of an atom bomb are on a city. I don't care to make literature or, worse, philosophy in art, not to speak of mathematics or science.

I don't care to extract abstract formal games from the external world.

I don't care to arouse neurotic reactions of testimony as if I were a sismograph or an automaton.

I don't care, therefore, in relation to the present painting and its trends:

to be a truist¹⁰, because the truth is only a temporary appearance. To be a realist, because the man who eats, the sick man, the fisherman in his boat I can see without needing the artist's eye.

To be a surrealist, because each gratuitous evasion, instead of entering into the cosmic rhythm determines an exit.

To be an abstract of whatever type it may be, apart from the formal value, is a gratuitous¹¹ construction of the world.

In conclusion, I am not interested in what is expressed by any of the paintings, as to the method of its expression. Even if, on the contrary as far as the research of formal values goes, I have a great deal of esteem and admiration for several artists of no matter what trend.

This is what interests me:

In the world, not the man-made world but the world including man, and the things created by man despite the love and respect I have for him, there is not one

9 "True" would be the English word for "dilettante".

10 "To be a follower of truth" would be the correct expression here.

11 "Groundless" would be the appropriate word here.

that satisfies me because in all of them I see a mistake. This applies not only in art but it applies¹² to all human manifestations. If I return to the origin, I say to myself that I think until today men have looked for ways of living but they have not lived. (To live signifies for me living with a complete harmony and participation of the being with others and with things).

The fact that today man, despite his critical intelligence and spiritual maturity is not capable of avoiding wars, revolutions and all the other horrors of modern life, is sufficient evidence.

The things which men do today give me personally much commotion, be it atomic energy research or ways of reaching the moon or a new method of buttoning one's trousers. But despite this emotion, I still do not know a single being, man or woman, to whom I can say, with you I live as a man. There are errors. Let us try to start from scratch. The experience of the past has already become part of my flesh and works within me.

From where am I starting? I start with the search of the other. I study the other one. I try to put myself in touch with him outside the conventional, directly.

Above all, naturally, my interest is in women.

This is the first "other" for me. Then come the others: men, children, animals, the sun the moon etc... All these things, in other words, have stayed at the roots where they were when man was put on earth.

So I say to myself:

When the sun goes down, my being realises this. When there is a moon, my being realises this.

When I kiss a woman, my being realises this.

When I walk with a friend, my being realises this.

When I play with a child, my being realises this.

Finally, I realise that the things which I see and which are not disguised by errors, which in other words present themselves in their elementary form, have value only in a future reality, even if they take place in the present.

That is to say, man can be in contact with the reality of the universe by means of the visible world and he can, consequently, express this reality by the same means. That is to say, man can live religiously, if we want to use one more this old and abused term, without the need of an intervention of a third element, but directly, in direct contact with things.

This as far as the content goes.

Now we come to the form, or, if we prefer, the expressive language (means).

And here I must do homage to many modern painters, because, even if I did speak of crisis before, I cannot speak of a crisis of pictorial value.

12 "Involves" would be the appropriate word here and above.

In fact, never before in the history of art have the pictorial values been so profound or have we had such a rich language of expression.

Research of form. Property of language? Adhesion of the expressive value to the expression itself.

Here I should open a separate chapter.

The problem is such a delicate and complicated one that I am afraid to begin. On the other hand, I am speaking to an audience not of painters, to whom many of my affirmations may seem abstract.

I will only make an essential affirmation.

The problem of form in itself does not exist. Therefore I could theoretically affirm that if the artist were really in a state of grace (to use again the word of ambiguous significance) he would find the expressive form of what he wants to say without effort. Unfortunately, it is not like this. Each painting is for the artist a fight, until the final form is slowly born and defines itself, a final truth by means of a process of coarse errors, almost always with a laughable result in comparison with the effort expended¹³.

But this also because we artists are at the turning point of a civilization and if our predecessors have rightly disintegrated, it is up to us to re-integrate. And this work is more difficult, more tiring, more humble, if the result for the future is to be more fruitful.

I thank you.

13 "Done" would be the appropriate word here.