

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISUAL ARTS IN AMERICA

"L'intention de l'œuvre d'art n'est pas l'œuvre d'art."
(Henri Focillon, *La Vie des Formes*).

Starting from certain intuitions—which I would like to suppose are well founded—I shall try to discover if it is possible to speak of the visual arts characteristic of the American continent throughout the centuries.

One of these intuitions, the first in the order of exposition, could be formulated more or less as follows: In general, *the visual arts of the American continent are urgent, intense, excessive, but do not for this reason cease to enjoy a certain self-control that serves as a regulatory element.*

For the synthetic vision I am aiming at, I propose that the reader get used to the idea that we are browsing together through a good book on the subject¹ or walking through the halls of

Translated by Hans Kaal.

¹ Sigvald Linné and Hans Dietrich Disselhoff, *Amérique précolombienne* (Albin Michel, Paris), is generally excellent. I find nevertheless that the choice of illustrations is very arbitrary and the space devoted to architecture insufficient.

some museum with a fairly complete collection, with the intention of filming a documentary in color on this theme.

The geographic frame? An immense continent stretching from one pole to the other. But the maps are deceptive, for if the great central portion of America corresponds by its latitude to the tropics, it must be recognized that the superior cultures flourished almost exclusively in the temperate climate of the high plateaus.

As for the human element, America has since the dawn of history been populated very unevenly by races of unknown origin. The ethnologists have proposed three theories: According to some, the original inhabitants of America were *mongoloids* who came from Asia across the Bering Strait (which would not explain the plurality of languages); according to others, like Paul Rivet, there were migrations (in both directions) between the American coast and the Pacific archipelagoes; finally, according to still others, American man is autochthonous. In support of the first thesis, one might cite—in the area in which we are now interested—certain similarities between Chinese art and the Chinese ethnic type and, on the other hand, certain stone masks and small jade sculptures made about 800 B.C. by the Olmecs of Mexico. Later on, towards the end of the first millennium, and in Peru, there are also formal correspondences in profile and style of incision between the ceramics known as *Classical Tiahuanaco* and some Chinese bronzes of the second millennium B.C. Pure coincidence? Certainly, in the arts, equality of form does not in any way signify equality of content. Nevertheless, this unexpected similarity shocks us like an electric current. Is it necessary to record—as a fact of a different order—that from Mexico to Argentina the country folk with marked aboriginal features are called “Chinamen” (*chino* or *china*)?

For the latter aspect, one may, however, consult the notable monographs of Geneviève Bonnefoi in *Les architectes célèbres*, a work edited by Pierre Francastel (Mazenod, 2 vols.). The second volume contains a paper by myself which may prove useful on this occasion. A book by J. Alden Mason, *The Ancient Civilization of Peru* (Pelican), has always been indispensable to me in connection with Peruvian chronology. For Mexican chronology, I have throughout consulted the admirable catalogue, *Chefs-d'œuvre de l'art mexicain*, of the 1962 Paris exhibition by its director, Fernando Gamboa.

Let us, like characters in *science fiction*, fly through history and move, not only through space, but also—what is much more exciting and more fashionable—through time. And let us ask the arts to tell us about the mentality, the spiritual content, of those cultures.

But we know since Socrates at least that there is a technique of interrogation. I will accordingly divide my inquiry into three periods—precolumbian, colonial and contemporary—and interrogate each period in its most significant art forms. In the ancient period, I will consider ceramics and architecture, in the colonial period, architecture and sculpture (statuary and sculptured ornaments), and in the contemporary period, painting and the folk arts.

My choice of precolumbian arts can, I believe, be easily justified. Ceramics is the most ancient art, utilitarian and “folk” by *antonomasia*. Architecture on the other hand is in ancient times an essentially social art, religious and “symbolic” (a concept on which I will explain myself below). Let us for the moment return to ceramics: It always appears when prehistory turns into history, in the articulation of times. Dynamic and spontaneous, it tells us about ordinary everyday life, which the major arts leave as a rule untouched. But ceramics too is charged with symbolism, and it would be more than naive on our part to believe that we could “read” it directly—just like that and no more. Such an immediately legible text is non-existent in the arts, on any level and in any circumstances.

All examples of precolumbian art will be taken exclusively from Mexico and Peru, the two great centers of ancient civilization. It should be added here that Mexican ceramics has a dual nature: It is partly what will be called “on a small scale” (utilitarian containers, ritual idols) and partly “on a large scale” (funeral urns, large reliefs) in which case it frankly aspires to the status of sculpture.

In what I have called the “small scale,” our hypothetical color film would now focus, in our no less hypothetical museum, on a showcase containing ceramics from the so-called “Civilization of the Pacific Coast” (1000 B.C. to 1521 A.D.) where we would see pieces shaped like men or animals, made of brilliant red earth, relatively small (12 inches high), representing

for example a seated man with his arms and head on his knees, or a pregnant woman holding her belly with her hands, her body contorted, or a plump little dog (fattened before he was to be eaten) in the "realistic" posture of scratching himself, or finally another dog, wild, howling, already frankly "expressionistic." In our documentary, this last image would be superimposed on a painting by Rufino Tamayo, *Animals* (1942, Museum of Modern Art, New York). We would thus see the apparent coincidence between an ancient theme and its "modern" or "artistic" version. I say "apparent coincidence" because deep down in reality there can be no such thing.² The seated little man, the pregnant woman fighting her pain, the dog that scratches and the one that howls are not mere images that can be understood just by looking at them. The archeologists make it their business to tell us that it is a question of fertility rites, of propitiatory magic—a whole world that remains in darkness when the workman's pick disinters the piece.

We find the same symbolic character, though the sign is carried even further in complexity, in the great ceramic sculptures of the Zapotecs (650 B.C. to 1521 A.D.) of central Mexico, the architects of Monte Albán and Mitla. Here they are of interest only as ceramic artists, and as such they are worthy of being compared to the Etruscans. To avoid getting lost in digressions, let us choose the funeral urn representing the rain god Cocijo, a piece 24 inches high which is preserved in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The specialists date it between 350 and 700 A.D. The great urn is treated as curved planes pursuing one another through space. The front view shows the god's face with a mask; the mouth is open, showing the ferocious teeth. The whole is dynamic and aggressive but so skilfully done that, if the result is frightening, it is only because it is at the same time a great work of art.³

² What the image signifies for the ancient potter and what it signifies for Tamayo are things belonging to different mental worlds. One might of course also wield here the enigmatic phrase of the Italian historian De Sanctis: "The content is subject to all the accidents of history: It is born and it dies; only the form is immortal."

³ "The sign signifies, but having become form, it seeks to signify itself; it creates a new sense, searches for a new content..." Henri Focillon, *La Vie des Formes*.

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Precolumbian Mexican ceramics, whether folk art or art, tries to transcend matter by subjecting it to an almost unbearable tension. By its side, Peruvian ceramics may appear steeped in apparent objectivity. In Nazca pottery (400 to 1000 A.D.) the form is traditional—conic sections, spherical pitchers. The ornaments, at first glance geometrical, *always result from the stylization of the fauna or flora with which the artist was acquainted*. Hence a trait which seems to me a dominant one in precolumbian American art—an attachment to nature, but sublimated or stylized in search of universality and transcendence.

To follow a method of successive confrontations, let me take, after “geometrical” art, an example of “direct observation”—the so-called “portrait vases” of *Chimú* ceramics (1300 A.D.). We need only leaf through a good monograph⁴ to see a whole gallery of human types, highly differentiated psychologically and sometimes with physical defects or identifiable diseases (like harelip or leprosy, as in the examples from the Museum of the Plate River and of Ethnography, Buenos Aires). Certainly nothing would be easier than to diagnose this as “realism.” There is a great power of observation, but it is also always accompanied by an extraordinary power of synthesis which places these portraits in the category of great art. We find again a basic respect for matter and an intense way of dealing with it (which is more serene in Peru than in Mexico). But let us not be so naive as to think that there is only a childish curiosity about what is strange and unique in this catalogue of painful poses, defects and monstrosities. The “cases” portrayed may have represented something highly significant in the lives of the people who thus sought to perpetuate them.

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Architecture is the social art *par excellence*. In America, as in virtually all ancient cultures, architecture had not only its minimal “practical function,” but was dominated by its “symbolic function”—the real motive force behind architecture and its

⁴ F. Márquez Miranda, *Huacos, Cultura Chimú*, Cuadernos de Arte Americano, with photographs by G. Stern and H. Coppola, Buenos Aires, 1943.

reason for being. To fill in a little of the background, I should add that in Mexico and in pre-Inca Peru the original content of architecture was *religious* while, starting with the Inca empire, it became primarily *politico-religious*—as, incidentally, it continued to be, though with a different content, in colonial times.

Between 300 and 650, we find in the Valley of Mexico the culture of Teotihuacán which inaugurated the series of great architectonic wholes in the New World. Teotihuacán (like Tiahuanaco, in the vicinity of what is now La Paz) represents extreme severity expressed by rigorous geometry and bareness of forms. The architecture of Teotihuacán which “merges with the landscape” might be contrasted with Monte Albán and Mitla, the works of the Zapotecs, which “clash with the landscape.” The ancient Maya and Maya-Toltec styles constitute an alliance between architecture and sculpture—non-geometric sculpture, stylized Grecian frets as in Mitla, but figurative and eminently symbolic. The general characteristic of these three periods in Mexico—to which we might add the Aztec period, which was later in time and lacking in originality—is an ability to structure monumental wholes intended primarily for processions and ceremonies or what might be called “theater” in a good sense of the term.

On the other hand, the Incas of Peru, great builders themselves, were a little like the Romans—engineers rather than architects. Were they, like the Romans, preoccupied with the building of an empire?

As in the case of ceramics, it must be clearly admitted that it takes much effort to “read” in our days the highly symbolic architecture of the precolumbian peoples. Around Teotihuacán appear already all the elements of ancient Mexican architecture—pyramids, echeloned temples, esplanades, rhythmic flights of stairs. To complete the picture, recent discoveries⁵ have brought to light, and continue to bring to light, palaces that served as residences for deified personages and were covered with brilliant

⁵ The French archeologist Laurette Séjourné has thoroughly studied one of these palaces in her monumental work *Un palacio en la Ciudad de los Dioses*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología, Mexico, 1959. One should also consult, by the same author, *Pensamiento y religión en el México antiguo*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1957.

frescoes. The pyramids of the Sun and the Moon in Teotihuacán are immense, truncated, gently sloped. They did not, like the Egyptian pyramids, serve as tombs, but possibly as bases for temples that stood on top of them and could be reached by magnificent flights of stairs. We also find there, in the temple of Quetzalcóatl, a model that was to be repeated again and again—echelons with varicolored statues. The great vacant space known in Teotihuacán as the "citadel" (an equivocal name, like almost all the names the Spaniards gave to what they encountered) was used, after Xochicalco, for the ball games, a sinister sport ending with human sacrifices. Architectonically, it required a field bordered by walls, platforms and balconies. This complex is one of the characteristic elements of Mexican architecture.

If almost all the elements existed already at the time, the form and the interpretation varied with each culture. In Monte Albán and Mitla the walls are vertical; the ornaments are confined to special areas or panels and consist of stone frets cut in relief—possibly a later development of the stylized body of the serpent. In Ancient Maya—Uaxactún, Tikal, Copán, Palenque—the echeloned temples are extremely steep, and great sculptured steles, overflowing with ornaments and forming a dominant curve, serve as landmarks to limit and "construct" a space in the open. The great syncretic Maya-Toltec style came into being when the Toltecs, the inventors of *atlantes* (human columns), subjugated the Mayas and, jointly with them, built Chichén-Itzá and Uxmal in Yucatan (tenth to thirteenth centuries). Thus columns and vaults came into use for the construction of closed monumental edifices, apart from the echeloned temples and the already indispensable ball-game ritual. On the outside, the walls were literally covered with sculptured ornaments of the highest quality. Whether geometric or figurative, they were always symbolic and never gratuitous. On the inside, where it was practically dark, a technique was developed for painting in the most vivid colors, very similar to the illuminated codices except for its gigantic scale.

How can we compare the aesthetic principles of the two great periods in ancient Mexican architecture? Teotihuacán—which we would see from a plane flying low over its ruins—can be expressed essentially as a play of vacant esplanades,

flights of stairs repeated like a *leitmotiv*, the monumental use of truncated pyramids—truly “artificial mountains”—dominant horizontals and an orgy of right angles in a lunar landscape. The tendency to excess, which I just proclaimed as one of the permanent traits of American art, is present here in this wilful architecture stripped of all non-essentials.

On the other hand, if the wholes in Maya-Toltec architecture are also enormous, they are not on a planetary scale. They are rather sacred precincts with many ritually significant outbuildings. There is no such landscaping as in Teotihuacán where it amounts to a real “conditioning of space” in competition with, or imitation of, nature proper. In Chichén-Itzá and Uxmal, the landscape is first of all not only distinct from, but also antagonistic to, the buildings. We are no longer on the cool plateau with its blue skies and huge white ever-changing clouds, but on a low peninsula covered with thickets—an extensive plain without rivers but with underground currents that blossom into eyelets of water—into *cenotes*, altars of sacrifice.

There is less of a plan in Inca architecture. The aesthetics change with the mentality. Is it a matter of self-defense? There is the cyclopean fortress of Sacsahuamán in the heights of Cuzco. The Spaniards did not believe that human beings could have built its triple ramparts with blocks 16 to 20 feet wide and weighing up to 200 tons....Is it a matter of building an impregnable city? There is Machu Picchu at the summit of a vertical mountain in the heart of the Andean Massif. The rock has been modeled like clay into houses, palaces, terraces for cultivation, stairs ascending with Indian patience, roads, aqueducts. There is no trace of sculptured ornaments. The effect resides in a triple root—the colossal size of the blocks, the inhuman perfection of their workmanship and the improbable sites to which the stones have been hoisted. Is there excess as well? Undoubtedly. Every one of these cultures, each in its own way, adjusts itself in its architecture, as it does in its ceramics, to the American spirit that I have tried to define *a priori* as *tension carried to the limit*, but it dominates matter and its expressions as only a supremely artistic culture or individual is capable of dominating it.

To generalize, in the perfect museum we have postulated

we would still have to see, to convince us of this truth, some examples of Olmec sculpture—great protuberant faces where the block, whether cubical or spherical, is nevertheless dominant—and of Mayan stuccos, like the monumental figure of the smiling woman (measure it and it is only 13 inches high) in the Museum of Michoacan, or the admirable Sacrificed Warrior, an apparently realistic figure, but whose nose for example is treated as an independent volume, a mark or artistic audacity.

But we would also have to look at the work of the goldsmiths, somber and terrifying in the Mixtec-Puebla culture and delicate, decorative and filiform among the Muiscas of Columbia. And the Peruvian textiles, the glorious expression of their culture, where the rhythmic repetition of the "motif" infects in the end even the stone ornaments. In the ancient period, we would have to see the varicolored embroidery of the necropolis Paracas, and in the later period, prior to the Incas, the "gobelins" overlaid with individually woven pieces whose quality and beauty could only be compared to the best of the Coptic textile arts.

But if my conclusion applied only to great art, my demonstration would be at bottom fallacious. The ideal museum should also show us in an infinity of other showcases—and here the film would play with superpositions and continuous sequences—the necklaces of the Jivaros made of the necks of decapitated toucans with their furiously colored plumage and their beaks aggressive even after death, the barbarous cloaks of the Patagonians made of tanned and varicolored horse hides, and finally the infinity of fans, masks, arms, tools, ornaments and cloaks with which the ancient Americans dressed or hunted or worshipped their gods. We should see in all of them something urgent, wilful and assertive, violent and passionate. Much of this ancient heritage remains even in the present. But before going any further, let us see what the successive waves of different kinds of colonizers brought when they launched their attack on America.

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I think I can distinguish four principal waves—the conquerors, the international religious orders, the peaceful invasion of the

Negro slaves and the more aggressive one of immigrants from all over the world. To begin with the first Spanish and Portuguese arrivals, their enterprise was political and religious in temper, and with them came a handful of friars and priests from the Iberian peninsula who were content to introduce a poor and timid architecture and a less than rudimentary form of sculpture and painting. The second religious wave, after the Council of Trent in particular, was made up of new orders born in the heat of the Counterreformation and brought other standards, different from the purely peninsular ones of the first wave. The third wave which in my opinion is not being given the attention it deserves was that of the Negroes who brought with them an immense wealth of religions, rites, folklore, art and music which has had an enormous influence on at least part of the continent. Finally, during the nineteenth century and in ours came the tide of immigrants who wanted "to make America theirs" and who brought with them, whether they wanted to or not, a different thousand-year-old past.

The Spaniards and the Portuguese disembarked with their historical styles which were to be called successively the Gothic (The Catholic Kings and Manuelino), Mudejar, Plateresque, Blacksmith Classic, Baroque and Rococo. And America was the passive recipient of whatever the mother country sent, though its turn came only after a delay. Now too, before going any further, I must pass on another one of my most stubborn intuitions: I believe that, *between the conception of form brought by the conquerors and that of the natives, there was no fundamental incompatibility*. Given the complexity of Western civilization, what the Europeans brought in architecture contained a major dose of what I have called "practical function," even though, at the height of the sixteenth century, they still believed primarily in the "symbolic function" and experienced it intensely. Their tradition which should have been basically Greco-Latin remained—perhaps because of its proper nature, the influence of the Arabs and the intrusion of Nordic styles—outside the current of rationality (in which Italy and France do quite naturally belong). As a result, the architecture of the conquerors was symbolic and irrational; it too was carried to the limit (as in the excessive bareness of the Escorial or in the delirious ornamen-

tation of the Baroque), and surely it could not be regarded as *opposed* to the native style.

As far as ornamentation is concerned, the coincidence seems to me even greater. If the Incas or Mayas used geometrical Grecian frets, the conquerors brought with them, for centuries, the Mudejar ornament of star-shaped polygons, that complex intercrossing of lines that avoids the figurative in accordance with Muslim law. These ornaments are certainly not equal, but on the other hand, they can perhaps be regarded as equivalent in a certain way. As far as the other form is concerned, that of ornaments inspired by the stylization of nature, I also find a fundamental coincidence. The peninsular style is more contained and perhaps more insistent on the third dimension; the native style on the other hand is more violent and relies for expressiveness on particularly harsh colors.

Since no conclusive proof is possible in this area, I propose the following question to the reader of good will, urging him to answer it with entire frankness: Would this coincidence have perhaps been possible, however unlikely, if America had been colonized, not by the Spaniards or the Portuguese, but by the Italians of the Renaissance? I believe that the answer is clearly in the negative. And I suppose that the deepest reason to which it can be traced is the incontrovertible fact that the Italians have always, even at the height of Mannerism or Baroque, carried forward the rational tradition they inherited from Greece and Rome.

If architecture had at first been almost exclusively religious and military and copied from peninsular models, things began to change when a large number of international orders came to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Suddenly the source of inspiration was not just Spain or Portugal, but the country of origin of each of the friars or priests who served as architects. At other times—as was only too evident in the case of the Jesuits—the thing that was to prevail over all else was what might be called “the style of the order.”⁶

⁶ The Franciscans Jodoco Ricke and Pedro de Gante (both Flemish) worked in Quito and Mexico respectively (cf. Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America*, New York, Macmillan, 1951). Fathers Lemer (Flemish), Kraus (Ger-

Exterior decoration continued to be applied in America in the peninsular manner, *i.e.* at *concentrated points*—high parts, portals, door and window frames.⁷ In the interior, such extravagance was concentrated on choir stalls, gates and especially on immense altarpieces which, according to the custom of the mother country, transformed an inert rear wall into a true vertical prolongation of the altar. Even though at first sight the themes appear to have been treated in an orthodox manner on the outside as well as on the inside, as soon as we begin to observe them with care, we discover interferences and syncretic features tolerated (if not favored) by the friars: Is it a Christian halo or the Sun worshipped by the Incas? The Virgin Mary or the feminine maternal principle of the Earth? Catholicism understood the need for compromise, of building on the ancient faith (as the Spaniards had already done in the kingdom of Granada when they conquered the ancient Moorish cities one by one). In America—to go no further—the church of Saint Dominic in Cuzco was built on an Inca temple of which one can still see the magnificent cyclopean wall that served as its foundation. To take another example, the church of Our Lady of Remedies in Mexico was deliberately planted on top of the pyramid of Cholula, the biggest in the whole country.

I have referred to choir stalls, altarpieces, abundant sculptured ornaments both on the outside and the inside of cathedrals, churches, convents. That is to say, I have been passing imperceptibly from architecture through relief to sculpture. This is another trait which the colonial period shares with the ancient. Our division into arts complementary to one another is a modern and quite misleading one. I suppose that, for a Maya or for a Latin American of the eighteenth century, there would be no conscious separation between architecture, sculpture and painting or between the *major* and the *minor* or *useful* arts. They were

man) and Bianchi (Italian) were church architects in Argentina (cf. *Les architectes célèbres*, cited above).

⁷ I have developed these points of view in an article, "L'art architectural de l'Amérique espagnole," *Annales*, April-June, 1959, and in another, "L'Escorial est-il bien 'espagnol'?", *Annales*, Jan.-Feb., 1962.

all given as a single instance—as an urgent need to find the most eloquent expression.

Nevertheless, from our modern, classificatory, point of view it can be said that, while colonial painting was quite poor (only in Cuzco did an interesting school with features of its own develop), colonial sculpture shone with unreflected light. Was it the memory of ancient traditions or a coincidence of mental attitudes? The fact is that Indians and half-breeds learned very quickly and very well what the conquerors were able to teach them. Half of the architects were natives or half-breeds, and more than half of the statuaries belonged to the same race. In Ecuador, we have among the latter Legarda and Caspicara (eighteenth century) and in Brazil, the mulatto Antonio Francisco Lisboa, better known by his nickname *Aleijadinho* (also in the eighteenth century).⁸

I have just mentioned a mulatto, which means that it is time to turn to the third wave which is so important, that of the Negroes who were brought to America to serve as slaves. This strong healthy race acclimatized themselves marvelously to the American tropics. They generally went to the Caribbean and to the Brazilian coast where hardly any natives remained, so that it can be said that they themselves accomplished a "cultural conquest" and in the end helped to define the Latin American character which still abounds—as if there were a lack—in the violence of its expression. In fact, all of the Caribbean, Brazil and the Plate River were infected by this colorful, clamorous, shifting, gay and sensual world. But it must also be recognized that the seats of ancient cultures—Peru, Mexico, the areas bordering on these countries and, in general, the highlands—have always remained Indian or half-breed. They are more sober (at least in appearance, for there is also Indian violence as there is, more obviously, Negro violence) and also more impenetrable and more sad. In one word, it is the difference between a carnival in Bolivia—with seemingly Tibetan masks and pentatonic music—and a Negro carnival in Brazil or Cuba—uninhibited, rhythmic, erotic.

⁸ Sebastián de la Cruz (a Jesuit of Potosi) and Juan Tomás Tuyrú Tupac (of San Pedro, Cuzco) were Indians.

Now we have almost reached the modern period. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came the immigrants from all parts of the world. Could they really impose the new on the old—on what they felt was Indian, conqueror or Negro? As for the great surface of the continent, the countryside, they were completely powerless against tradition. The continent imposed a rhythm on them, an unmistakable tempo that was its very own, producing the contrary phenomenon, that of the European, the *gringo*, who became in the end part of the soil to which he had come in search of food and shelter. In the big cities on the other hand, the immigrants, no matter where they came from, did create the most interesting and inextricable cultural problems.

For since the middle of the nineteenth century, people began to look to Europe and the United States, especially in those countries where the native cultures were insignificant and where the inhabitants were descended from immigrants. Argentina, Uruguay and Chile are, together with a minority culture in Brazil, the great "clients" of Europe. On the other hand, the Northern part of Latin America—Central America—finds itself taken in tow by the strong and dominant culture of North America.

When artists set out to travel, they go especially to Italy and to Paris. In our century, all the great periods in art can be said to be remade and relived, either sooner or later, in every Latin American country that tries to capture what is novel and to attain the vanguard in all things. And each country then begins to have a history and to constitute a particular case to which generalizations are largely inapplicable. The Mexicans for example, having effected their revolution in the beginning of the century, "needed" artists to back them up. Thus Rivera, Orozco, the best artists of their generation, took up a valiant and uncompromising position which would nowadays, fifty years later, turn out to be either useless or ingenuous. The same happened later in Brazil with Portinari, and the same may keep on happening nowadays in any country that may want to go through a similar adventure.

Besides this art with its social content—which is always present in America—there have been other artists, no doubt

more Europeanized, whose main concern has above all else been purely aesthetic. A great sensitive painter, the finest of colorists, like the Uruguayan Figari finds his complement, or shall we say equilibrium, in his antagonistic compatriot Torres García, a seemingly "cold" artist, a classicist who remade the history of art for his own private use and who was a moderating element so useful on a continent given to excess. Something similar is true of Argentina: For Victorica, whose forms show little composition but whose colors are exquisite, we also find an antithesis in Pettoruti, an intransigent artist who, since Europe, has been one of the protagonists of Italian futurism and international cubism.

The most frequent type of artist is nevertheless the violent, exasperated type. It may be the Mexican Tamayo who went beyond the lessons of his elders to rejoin the native tradition by means of the most refined color and subject matter. Or it may be Wilfredo Lam, the Cuban artist who unites in his predominantly somber paintings three, in the final analysis not so antagonistic, roots—the Negro, the Indian, and the European surrealist and expressionist which inclines towards the magical, dreamlike. It may also be the Chilean Matta, aggressive in portrayal, in subject matter, and refined in coloration, full of allusions to the earth, sex, the ancestral myths.

Latin American artists frequently speak of "large spaces," of "the earthy feeling of the earth," of "other dimensions." Their best interpreter, as well as self-interpreter, is the Chilean poet Neruda. As to the international critics, they stay eagerly on these tracks and write more of this "literary" and absolutely capricious prologue. Nevertheless, I myself who am against all this and have broken lances more than once on this scabrous theme,⁹ cannot fail to recognize that there may be some truth in the most sincere efforts. What some of them intuit obscurely cannot in the final analysis be entirely false.

I will certainly be told that, in addition to these "archaists" (in the good sense of the term), there are others, especially Argentinians and Venezuelans, who practice a diametrically opposed

⁹ Most recently in an article, "Arte latinoamericano en París: Crítica a los críticos de una exposición," *Cuadernos*, No. 67.

art—constructivist, interested in geometry, dynamics, new materials, transparencies. But my reply is that they too exaggerate in their own way and carry things to the limit. In them, the violence exerts itself in their attempt to contain it, if I may be permitted the paradox.

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To resume this already lengthy disquisition, the peoples of ancient America, god-fearing and strongly attached to the soil, created an original art and communicated and expressed themselves in an urgent, wilful and intensely felt manner. Their art is nevertheless neither merely decorative nor so wildly deformed as to inspire a feeling of terror incapable of controlling its own expression. Nor do I see them, in general and throughout many cultures and different centuries, aiming at an art comparable for example to Negro idols—nocturnal, erotic, violent, without self-control like their exorcisms and their rites. Nor does ancient American art resemble that other restrained eroticism of the Indian temples where social life and the universe seem to revolve around sexual principles and on allusions to them. On the other hand, American art shows itself very close to the earth, to fauna and flora in their double aspect of generation and corruption, the ultimate destiny of all living things.

However, a positive parallel could perhaps be established with Egyptian art, even though American art is not “projected towards eternity” as art is in the Valley of the Nile. If it appears more “realistic,” let us not deceive ourselves; its realism always tries to sublimate itself in a painful ascent towards the spiritualization of form. But—and this is the other pole of the comparison—we must recognize in this connection that it never goes as far as Greek or Khmer art, at least in their classical stages, in which all forms appear to infect one another with felicity and perfection. American precolumbian art is always attached to the earth. This is its limitation and its glory.

If the repertory became larger after the colonizations and if guiding and unifying principles appeared, let us also agree that American art became in a way more baroque, heavy, impure and exasperating in its expression. But in spite of this, Latin

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American art during the last two centuries possesses in its major artists, whether folk or not, an equilibrium that allows it to exert the tension of which I have been speaking since the beginning, with a power of self-control that escapes the superficial observer. Such self-control is incidentally partly lacking in many good artists of the expressionistic school, in North Americans as well as Scandinavians or Germans. I do not in fact find among the better Latin American artists anything like the un-directed and exacerbated violence to be found in Munch, Ensor, Schmidt-Rotluff, Nolde, de Kooning or Appel.

Whether it be due to the native tradition, to the contribution of the conquerors—the majority of whom were after all from the Mediterranean culture—or perhaps to the coincidence of all this, the fact is that those artists who always express themselves in forms *at the limit of tension* do after all exert self-control. They do scream, but it is the scream of a disciplined song, keeping in view a total, a final, effect. To exceed the measure without restraint is by definition to practice anti-art and in the end to run the risk of being unable to communicate anything, not even the most urgent message.

A proof for what I am saying? The very discreet and measured use which good Latin American painters make of color, that terrible—irrational—vehicle of feeling. If in some of them the color turns out to be extremely violent, it is always manipulated, as in the folk arts, with a feeling for the measure which gives it its artistic effect.

To conclude, I would never say, and it would never occur to me to say, of native art and its successor, Latin American art, that they are *romantic*, *baroque*, *expressionistic*, and no more. The laborious definition I have proposed is drawn in half-tones and had to be recorded in an obscure and confused manner in these difficult pages whose only possible excuse is, in the last resort, that they were written with innermost passion.