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Architecture and the Arts

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## LE CORBUSIER

### Architecture and the Arts

THE PAINTING that has been transmitted to us by history is partly figurative, documentary painting. It was legitimate that this painting should be documentary for the reason that no special organism, no mechanism made it possible to do any better than the clever manipulation of the brush permitted.

Painting assumed a very special role during thousands of years: for one thing, that of constituting documentary archives or perpetuating a sermon or a speech; fixing, in more or less hermetic forms, a thought, a doctrine; making a permanent fact out of a fugitive event. But in doing this, and independently of these utilitarian tasks, painting—and this is its very foundation, its destiny—fixed figurations charged with lyricism. When painting was good, this lyricism was specifically that of forms, variable and infinitely diverse, plastic harmony. To move the sensitive heart—the wholesome hearts—to evoke poetry was then the definite aim of painting and the arts.

Today we are saturated with images. That impassive machine, the camera lens, has gone beyond the human retina. This mechanism fears neither heat nor cold; it is never tired. In consequence it has the advantage of exceptional sight to such an extent that its products are a revelation to us. They permit us to enter into the mysteries of the cosmos through investigations that our human possibilities could not hope to attain.

In consequence we are swamped with images, through the cinema as well as through the magazine or the daily newspaper. Is not, then, a great part of the work formerly reserved for painting accomplished? When an epoch is about to close, when it is animated by no collective motive, it drifts into delights of intimacy and tenderness. It is natural that at that moment painting should abound, that we should see countless painters working and living well. But let us turn the page. It had to be done one day, and today is the day. We are entering on a collective period: painting is losing part of its purpose; painters are losing their clientele. And that is the dramatic situation today, an anguish of being useless.

Let us try to see if the experience undergone by painting constitutes regression or progress. When an epoch becomes collective, or is possessed by indisputable communal needs, it then witnesses the appearance of a need to edify appropriate new systems of all kinds, and above all, there is the need to construct a new type of equipment.

It is useless to recall the significance of the mechanical revolution which took place in the last century: it has ridden over the societies of the world; it has overthrown everything, disturbed everything, molded everything. It has injured everything; but at the same time, to those who know how to read the times, it has brought a certainty of approaching release from distress and crisis.

With this marvelous instrument, which will henceforth take the place of our hands and our sweat—the machine—we will equip ourselves usefully, not only for comfort—an enormous, healthy form of comfort—but also this new period of mechanical civilization will awaken in us the joys of a maximum of individual liberty together with collective inspiration.

I will mention here some of the imminent work to be done: the equipment of our country, of all countries of the world: cities, roads, villages, farms, ports, all the places men inhabit or traverse. A gigantic activity seizing upon the entire world and placing us face to face with hitherto unsuspected tasks. This equipment opens the field of a new era to architecture. Elie Faure, placing himself on the historical plane, was able to state that in times of communal preoccupations, architecture has the floor.

And so the spirit of construction becomes our great preoccupation. It will no longer give charms of an intimate order, such as easel painting could give; it will bring the means for a new life for which the great factors at stake will be sun, nature, the culture of the body and the spirit—a sort of new selection introduced into human species. A new life, and, let us imagine it, a life of physical and spiritual beauty.

But what will become of painting, of sculpture? These two major arts, it seems, should accompany architecture. Their place is there. The architecture of modern times is not only that which the reviews publishing our works show; here are only the realizations of programs made when our hand has been forced, programs of doubtful interest which, nevertheless, have made it possible to approach the study of man, of his spiritual and physical needs. It will be a new start from zero, a good cleaning up of an enormous pile of mistakes, deformations, academic laziness. What modern architecture has accomplished up till now is but trifle and trash. It is, nevertheless, an accomplished revolution.

If we force ourselves to think about the great new works of modern times, we note that certain aesthetic pursuits are out of date. Other tasks present themselves on a new plane; we are entering into an epic cycle, one that appeals to the spirit of art, of course, and in consequence to the artists of spirit.

We are happy to have taken part in the startling efflorescence of the most liberating painting movement that has existed for a long time, an art movement that has brought us again in contact with great epochs of art and thought throughout many lands and ages, which brings with it unequalled possibilities for the future at the very moment when painting and statuary have lost the sense of style and degenerated into a bourgeois quietude—into a decadent art, nationalized through the good offices of the ministries of the beaux-arts, themselves inspired by the academies. I am referring here to the cubist movement which, with its humorous title, burst upon us like a liberation. This liberation was so powerful that I am quite willing to see in it the spontaneous and prodigious explosion that takes place somewhere in the world when, suddenly, at some spot, in some place or other, the exhaust opens and the event springs into life.

This revolutionary event took place with clarity and divination. It was the artists who flung it at the world like a bomb from the mouth of its projector. We must recognize what the arrival of cubism meant twenty years ago. It was a consequence, of course, of the labor of predecessors, a new link added to the chain of tradition; perhaps an immediate consequence of the work of a few great experimenters of the nineteenth century.

This art has been called abstract through a disquieting misunderstanding of vocabulary. (Whenever there is a question of an artistic baptism, idiotic terms are dug up, for it is always the enemies who do the baptizing.) This art is concrete, not abstract. In France this concrete quality could not escape the fate of the spiritual life of the country; that is to say, it could not escape a fundamental activity. At the core of international production, French art, called abstract, is essentially concrete. Its realism is inside. It proceeds by layers that are deep in organic equilibrium. We find again the origin, the route, the key, to each one of its elements.

And so we find ourselves in a position to use this art. In what synthesis will this be possible? As an architect and painter, I am every day freshly absorbed in the problem: Will the plastic arts be able to incorporate themselves harmoniously in the architecture of the present time with a sufficient sense of the new reality? It is no longer a question of incorporating painting and statuary in architecture, as was sometimes agreeably done at certain epochs, principally during the times of the greatest ceremony and frivolity from the Renaissance to the present.

I believe that we are entering upon an epoch that is infinitely more serious, in which we no longer have the right to "stick something on something," but in which the pure spirit of renovation will be expressed by organisms possessing an interior mathematics, together with fixed and inalienable places where the work of art will radiate in all its power in exact concordance with the potential forces in the architectural work.

As an architect I may say that architecture is an event in itself. It can live entirely on itself. It has no need either of statuary or painting. Architecture creates shelters. These shelters answer human needs, beginning with the simple dwelling place on up through the civic, intellectual, and mystic organizations.

It has been customary, during the last twenty years, to insist that our homes have need of art and artists. There are those who feel that a dining room should be described by a basket of fruit painted or sculptured on the wall. It is my opinion that a good roast on the table takes care of that better. The home demands a great many other things that are more urgent. The tradition transmitted to us by the prints or other testimonials from the past, shows us the home life in the time of the kings, which was universally reputed luxurious. Decorations did not exist in those dwellings; the people lived in robust simplicity, which was a proof of their moral health. As for luxury, it was often of doubtful mixture. After the revolution of 1789 people wanted a bourgeois king, then a workman king.

I believe that painting and statuary will be incorporated in architecture for the reason that architecture is beginning over again at zero to reorganize everything from the skeleton through to the skin. Animating this skeleton, architecture has edified an authentic symphony through light and the manner in which this light clarifies walls; its lyricism is made of intensely real psychophysiological events, its controls are proportion. When all is ready for collaboration with the painter and sculptor it will not be with the intention of asking frivolous things of them. When we invite to our home a guest of distinction, of dignity, of real ability, and one whom we respect, we do not surround him with noise, we listen to him and he speaks amid the silence because he has something to say. In this collaboration of the major arts and architecture, dignity is not a vain pretension.

The conclusion becomes evident: such art requires distinguished personalities and distinguished temperaments. Who is prepared for this approaching task? I am afraid of the immense art production that has remained perfectly indifferent to the contemporary architectural event. I love walls, beautiful in their proportion, and I am apprehensive at turning them over to unprepared minds. For if a wall is spoiled, if it is soiled, if we kill the wholesome clear speech of architecture by the intro-

duction of an inappropriate style of painting or statuary, if we are not in the spirit, but against the spirit—it will mean just so many disappointing crimes.

There are two ways for us to call on painting. One way is entirely utilitarian. I have noticed, little by little, that the revolution in the modern techniques of the building profession was bringing us to an astonishingly complex biology of the house. This complexity of the modern plan puts us in opposition to the classical square room we have known so far. Sometimes, as a result of the biological necessity of the plan, curved or oblique partitions are necessary. It is through polychromy that the sensational play, the colored epic, soft, violent, can be introduced into a house. Using just those organic necessities of the modern plan, I have seen that tumults can be disciplined by color, lyrical space can be created, classification realized, dimensions enlarged and the feeling for architecture made to burst forth in joy.

This is not yet painting; it is architectural polychromy. I can, when walls overwhelm me by their presence, dynamite them with an appropriate color. But I can also, if the place is suitable, have recourse to a painter, ask him to inscribe his plastic thought in the spot, and with one stroke open all the doors to the depths of a dream, just there where actual depths did not exist.

The second way to interest painting carries with it a more concerted intention. The architect can make his composition with an a priori desire to bring out, at a given moment, the great song of plastic lyricism. That, then, is a complex of exalted harmony. But the danger he would run would be the dualism of two plastic events badly tuned: architecture and heterogeneous painting.

In the collaboration of mural painting and statuary with architecture envisaged, a discipline is needed, specific qualities of monumentalism and considerable preparation.

If we are at present wrongly judged in our manifestations of renovation, if the contemporary arts, painting, statuary, and even architecture, are only tolerated within certain bounds, it is because the opportunity has never been given us—and I am speaking of the small home as well as the city block—to create works whose contiguous surroundings would not be offensive. We have always been put aside in the question of site, infested with vestiges of the past—whether good or bad. We began our symphony with a proportion of 1 per cent modern spirit as opposed to 99 per cent old surroundings. There was nothing to exalt us, everything was against unity, and our continual role was to appear as heavyweights, the tough guys with the dirty, muddy boots stamping into an elegant tranquil so-

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ciety in order to set up our ways of thinking. And so it happened that our attitude was insolent, despite ourselves. On the day when harmony will reign in sufficient dimensions, the emotion of the people, of the masses, will be awakened; they will say, "It is beautiful."

We do not ask the man of the people to be familiar with the detours in the action that has brought about the result; but he will feel the harmony, the power, the clarity which we will have put there. When favorable circumstances will finally make it possible to rid ourselves of the depressing throwbacks which are the style today; when people will have ceased to look backward, to base their convictions on the Renaissance or the splendors of other days—many of which in fact might be disputed—we will then be sure, by keeping ahead and constructing things that go together, of provoking an enthusiastic unanimity.