

The Museum of Modern Art

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The Museum of Modern Art Opening Ceremonies
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When in the year 1933 we came as refugees from Hitler-Germany to New York, it was a great moment for us when we discovered The Museum of Modern Art. It was the first place in this bewildering city where we could say: "This is home!" It was home, not because it awakened German and European memories but because it was good! It represented to us all that for which we stood and fought and which made us strangers in the old country when that country let itself be conquered by the forces of evil. This museum then appeared to us as an embodiment of honesty in creative expression, both in architecture and in the arts for which architecture gives the space and the frame.

Remembering this experience I consider it as a great privilege that now I can give my thanks to those who have made such an experience possible, to the donors and builders of this house, to those who as guardians of its integrity have made an overwhelming number of right decisions and, above all, to the artists without whose works even the finest house remains an empty shell. My expression of gratitude is certainly personal, but it is meant to express the feeling of all those who, like myself, are neither artists nor art-experts, but who love the visual arts and have experienced, at least in some ecstatic moments, the opening and revealing power that art can have. And finally, I want to thank in the name of the many millions who have visited this place and had at least a glimpse beneath the surface of their ordinary life.

For the arts do both, they open up a dimension of reality which is otherwise hidden, and they open up our own being for receiving this reality. Only the arts can do this; science, philosophy, moral action and religious devotion cannot. The

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artist brings to our senses and, through them to our whole being, something of the depth of our world and of ourselves, something of the mystery of being. When we are grasped by a work of art, things appear to us which were unknown before, possibilities of being, unthought of, powers, hidden in the depth of life which take hold of us. They reach us through the language of art, a language different from that of our daily life, a language of symbols, however realistic the artistic style may be. This is true of all arts, and in a particular way of the arts of the eye, in the service of which this building has been renewed.

If the works of art open up and reveal what was closed and hidden, a breakthrough must occur in every artistic encounter with reality, a break through the familiar surface of our world and our own self. Only if the things as they are ordinarily seen and heard and touched and felt are left behind, can art reveal something out of another dimension of the universe. Without breaking our natural adherence to the familiar, the power of art cannot grasp us. Therefore, new ways of disclosing the world have always aroused the resistance of those who wanted to stay securely with the familiar. This is not the fate of a particular style, for instance the expressionistic; it is the fate of every unfamiliar way of looking at the world. It was the glory of this museum and of the artists whose works it chose, that they fought for the unfamiliar and for the insecure. Many creative breakthroughs from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the surface to the depth, have been shown on these walls. And we who are here today as grateful friends of the old Museum, hope that this will remain so in the renewed house. There is a rule in the life of the spirit, unfortunate but unescapable, "the rule of the forgotten breakthrough". The original creative breakthrough is the result of great tensions, inner struggles, victories and defeats, oscillations between hope and despair, overcoming of external resistance, and a final feeling of inner certainty, liberation and elation. But when it has happened and its creative power is visible, the unfamiliar slowly becomes a part of the familiar, things from the depth become pieces of the surface; the new way,

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once opening up and revealing, has lost this power. What was breakthrough has become repetition. The toil and the glory of the first experience is forgotten. Certainly artists can always appear who, within a given form, reveal unseen possibilities, creating the unfamiliar within the boundaries of the familiar. They are rare and equal to those through whom the first breakthrough occurred. And their works, like those of the others, retain their revealing power to the spectators for all later generations. They are the lasting harvest of a new way, because they have embodied the surprise, the genuineness, the revealing power of the breakthrough in their mature creation. This justifies the museums of classical art; and, certainly, a museum of modern art must try to grow in parts into a museum of classical art. But in order to become classical tomorrow, a work of art must have been revolutionary today.

The past history of the Museum happened in a period of continuous artistic rebellions and many breakthroughs in a short time. There is, however, a common characteristic in the whole period since the turn of the century: the predominance of the expressionistic element over against the realistic and idealistic. A consequence of this was a more radical disruption of the surface of things, a more intensive piercing into their elements, a more sensitive vision of their demonic depth than has happened for centuries. And as a theologian I want to say that this period, inspite of its poverty of religious paintings and sculptures in the traditional sense of the word, is a period in which the religious dimension has appeared with astonishing power in non-religious works. The collections of this museum and many of its exhibitions are one of the most important witnesses to this situation.

When we now look from the past to the future, we discern a radical movement which really goes to the roots. Let me call it "the art of non-art" or, in a more threatening way, the death of the concept of art. It is not an isolated event: one speaks today of the religion of non-religion, of a theology without God-language, of the language of being without being. In the art of non-art one attempts to combine

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pieces of trivial reality, which show through a magic, uncanny composition the triviality of our present existence. But they show it in an untrivial way. This dying of traditional concepts may be a genuine breakthrough; for these concepts are often an impediment for a fresh encounter with reality. And if they are this they should be removed, or at least a "non" should be put before them as in "religion of non-religion" and "art of non-art".

How is all this related to our daily life, in which we ordinarily live? The breakthrough is a precondition for bringing the deeper things of life into our life. But it is not the end; the way into the depth must be followed by a return to the surface. The images of our daily encounter, figures and faces must be transformed with the help of the elements out of which reality is constituted. Such returns have started. We do not know what their development will be. But one thing we know: it is not those who have remained with the familiar and have resisted the changes in the last period who will determine this development, but those who went into the depth, who dared to show the radically unfamiliar, and then returned. We hope that, while the past history of the museum was mostly a descending below the surface, the future history will also be a transforming ascendance to the surface on which we live. But what is decisive is that the works of art which will find a home in this museum retain the revealing power they had in the first period of its history.