

Selected Writings

Pure Art

A Defence of the Aesthetic

To E.L.T. Mesens

“Each thing must be said according to its rhythm.”

*– Pierre Bourgeois**

Though the existence of gravity is proved by the laws that influence all bodies, what may trigger an aesthetic emotion seems not to exist except in man’s imagination, and is created by him out of nothing; so, in order to discover what it is, you have to be a different kind of seeker than the gold-digger: you have to CREATE WHAT YOU ARE SEARCHING FOR; the artist has a natural aptitude for this activity.

The essential aim of the work of art, synonymous with the artist’s “discovery-creation”, is to trigger the aesthetic sensation in the viewer AUTOMATICALLY.

A work of art, like a house, a lens, a billiard ball or any other product of human activity, must be perfect in order to fulfil its essential function and continue to satisfy the spirit when it is not in use. This perfection will then be the “decorative-spiritual side”, which is a result and not an aim. Like any other object, the work of art, in order to achieve the maximum (only relative perfection is possible) must have a distinct character and be uniquely concerned with completely fulfilling its essential function.

ON ARCHITECTURE

*Subtitle of On the Basis of Morality by Arthur Schopenhauer: “Submitted to the jury of the Royal Danish Society of Sciences in Copenhagen, 30th January 1840 and NO PRIZE.”**

The essential *raison d’être* of a house is to be a more comfortable dwelling than natural shelters.

The house is necessary; but what is essential is the perfect solution of a problem that has been posed correctly, a pretext for action. A house should

fulfil only its essential function, the only one it can fulfil wholly. Then it will be perfect and continue to satisfy the mind and the spirit.

All objects can achieve this relative perfection. Only works of art achieve it in the realm of aesthetics, which is the essence of what they express.

It is a GREAT MISTAKE to believe that, in order to be perfect, the house must have an additional aim: to trigger aesthetic sensations automatically in the inhabitant or the passer-by. This old preconception must be removed from house-building, as it has disappeared from the building of the best ocean liners, electric and mechanical machines, tools; there was never any question of this in the manufacture of lenses: if half-aesthetic, half-scientific conceptions got in the way, then they would not have the ideal form necessary to fulfil their function; or, for example, in airplane construction, where, because of RISK OF DEATH, builders are obliged to shape the most minute part of the plane according to its function.

A window with aesthetic proportions fulfils its function little better than a false window. We do not want to suffocate in a room which is badly ventilated, because a window has been made too small in order to “look good” in the façade of the house.

There is a pressing need to divorce that ill-matched old couple, building and art, that is: architecture; for, as in the past when theology prevented philosophy from evolving freely, aesthetic taste is impeding the marvellous discoveries of the building engineer.

A wine has a pleasing colour because that is naturally the colour of a good wine; similarly we shall see, when we have tested it, that the shape of a building that is comfortable is the most pleasing – the most comfortable houses prove it; they are the most beautiful, and if there are ugly parts, they always occur when the builder has not solved a construction problem successfully, or has sacrificed this essential problem to a whim.

“Beauty is merely the anticipation of happiness.”*

That beauty cannot be denied when we look at the shape of a locomotive, a microscope, a needle, a screw, a rotary press... Avant-garde architects have intuited this, but they make a grave mistake by getting their inspiration from these shapes and applying them to the house; they impose them VISUALLY and not in the spirit that gave rise to these forms. The Style (the shape) of the locomotive is a result and not an aim in itself.

The ideal shape of a glass or a pencil is the result of chemical or mathematical experiments, and not of a desire for an aesthetic effect; when, as in architecture, an aesthetic aim is introduced, the glass is uneven, botched; it is half glass, half piece of sculpture. It is only logical to reject something slipshod when you can get the thing right.

We must SPECIALIZE to achieve more INTENSITY; each object would then have its own particular style; then we would have RICHES. When people want to make every object in the same style, the aesthetic style of a work of art, it leads to poverty.

The mechanical engineer has more pride than the architect: he finds his job interesting enough without adding aesthetic aims; he does not pass his machine off as a work of art.

ARCHITECTURE IS NOT AN ART. Greek temples? Cathedrals? Many of them would be perfect as sculptural structures if their creators had not had to conform to aims which were not aesthetic in order to inspire the religious spirit, house idols, etc. As an architectural structure (a meeting place, the height of a cathedral nave makes no sense; it is a response to a religious theory, which is somewhat different from an artistic necessity. Again considered from the structural point of view, the cathedral has solved the problem of vaulting ingeniously: the arches soar, resting on the smallest possible supports and relying on the combination of equal and opposite forces; they span a great space with, for that time, a minimum of materials. This is very ingenious, but certainly does not have the power to trigger aesthetic emotion automatically.

As for Greek temples, a particular misconception has often helped us to take the pleasure we get from the ingenious structure for aesthetic pleasure.

Up until now, architecture has juggled with the nature of aesthetics and the nature of the house; if only this compromise would disappear – let it be replaced by the building engineer, then the aesthetic problem will be rid of questions that have nothing to do with it. Then we will have perfection in architectural structures (the best possible for the present), a perfection already achieved in mechanics and which the human form conceived by man might have (doing away with accidents of birth – spare parts).

Objects made by man must be perfect: that is the only life he can give them. Forms of life can live despite their flaws, thanks to the will to live that nature has given them.

Like the study of machine manufacture, the study of house construction must only follow ingenious plans dictated by the need for order, hygiene and convenience; the elevation must be dictated by the plan and strength of the materials, offering an economic solution for the use of these materials. The problem of a window given to several architects will be successfully solved when, with all the existing building techniques, the solutions are identical; if we claim that a window can, from a structural point of view, be positioned rightly in several places, we leave out the economy of construction; it can have a mathematical precision like the unique shape of a

lens which we know has a special function. Standardization is necessary for perfection; the most recent style of house has to be the only satisfactory one. No fear of monotony: the present-day standardization of electric light bulbs is not monotonous; what is more, numerous specialized buildings (factories, banks, cinemas, schools, blocks of flats, private houses, etc.) will offer different aspects; different climates also require different solutions.

Idiots and “artistic” architects look at the telescope; contemporary man uses the telescope. The beauty of an object depends on the essence of that object. The beauty of the telescope is internal.

In architecture, a column is beautiful when its proportions, like the stem of a flower or a leg, depend on the strength of its materials. It is unnatural to add columns for aesthetic effect if they are not supporting anything, or to use solid iron columns the same thickness as stone ones to bear the same weight; or, having decided *a priori* on the thickness of the columns it is unnatural to use stone for its appearance when it would be easier to use iron.

Such tendencies prove one is a very bad architect; one may be a good sculptor; so, logically, one should stick to sculpture; there is nothing to stop us making sculptures as big as hangars for airships that we can walk into. The problems are the sculptor’s. Light and shade, volume, depth, angles spaced according to an implacable order and logic obeying the sculptor’s aesthetic needs, realizing a complete organism in which every detail is indispensable to the life of the work, a rigorously precise work; if the smallest detail is taken away, the work is mutilated.

The most powerful, ingenious man is the least compromising. FOR MORE BEAUTY the architect must be purely scientific. Style is not an end in itself: it is a result; the eternal style (that is, the style of the time) is the ESSENTIAL.

In the past, painting and sculpture were inhibited by story, history, religious spirit, etc. (cathedrals, *via dolorosa*, illuminations). They were used to emphasize a religious dogma or sentimental tale. Now, some architects claim that painting must only be an ADDITION to their buildings, whereas it has to be an integral part: painting at ease on the neutral wall and not neutral decoration of that wall. A comfortable wall puts up with the presence of men, flowers, animals, functional furniture; it also puts up with a plastic work of art. Paintings are not made for walls, but walls are made to shelter man and the objects he uses.

A painting hanging on the wall may be a disturbing factor; this disturbance is only superficial; it is caused by life; it is inevitable; fated; in the deepest sense it is order: law. There is nothing more peaceful than a plain surface, but the life of a good picture is more precious than the wall’s silence. The train does not spoil the scenery.

If we want it to be neutral, the decoration of a wall must not express anything... it disturbs the peace of the wall without satisfying the spirit...
ART LOVERS BEWARE!

Michelangelo's paintings satisfy the spirit because, although he painted on the wall, he only thought of it as a material and was not interested in making his painting neutral.

Decorating a wall imposes additional difficulties on the decorator, and the resulting aesthetic effect has no more worthwhile value than the stories the ancients thought they had to introduce into their pictures; solving these difficulties results in an unsatisfactory expression of the creative idea. The decorator has to make use of the proportions and size of a wall; the free painter pictures the proportions and size of his canvas.

The role that architects demand of painting inevitably sweeps sculpture along with it (cornices, roses on the ceiling, sculpted panelling, consoles, moulding, etc.). Now, avant-garde architects already feel how ridiculous these frills are. LET US HOPE THEY WILL FOLLOW THROUGH THIS INSIGHT: LET US HOPE THAT THEY KNOW THAT THE MODERN AESTHETIC STRUCTURE OF A HOUSE IS AS RIDICULOUS AS THE DECORATIONS WHICH WERE ONCE THOUGHT TO BE INDISPENSABLE.

Must painting and sculpture be decorative, ornamental? Is the apple used to decorate the table? Must music be a digestive, a soporific? Must it be used as an alarm – so some eccentric industrialist, a patron of the arts, could have chimes in his factory instead of an electric bell?

It is not the job of painting and sculpture to reveal the beauty of materials (the hardware stores and the mason's yard do that very well) nor to decorate cups and saucers, nor to make up a woman's face, nor to decorate walls.

Primitive man slashed his face, painted his body and wore rings on his toes, in his ears and nose. We respect the primitives. They were wrong; let us not imitate them; imitation, plagiarism are signs of decadence, exhaustion, stupidity. In tattooing we merely see the first humble efforts of the creative instinct (the aesthetic impulse).

It is the same motive that, throughout the centuries, gave rise to the works of art we admire; but modern man could not live in a house conceived as a sculpture, nor under a ceiling decorated by a contemporary artist, even if he were Michelangelo.

Applied art only thrives on compromise, the petit-bourgeois mentality. The prejudice in favour of applied art is so deeply rooted in man that even civilized people prefer architecture, wall hangings, carpets, furniture and aesthetic lampshades to perfect objects. They think it is necessary to decorate objects in the name of perfection. What is more, they believe in the

logical evolution of decoration; they still think it is possible to introduce a modern style into decoration.

MODERN DECORATION DOES NOT EXIST; it is no longer relevant; it forces the good worker and the machine to prostitute their energy and results in a criminal waste of raw materials. Before it becomes defunct, the diamond industry will still count Kaffirs and Zulus among its most recent clients.

APPLIED ART KILLS PURE ART. The destruction caused by applied art is considerable; in order to live, many artists spend the better part of their lives destroying themselves by manufacturing artefacts that sell in mass production.* These mediocre works satisfy mankind's aesthetic need in a mediocre fashion; because of this, man takes no further interest in the works of pure art by these same artists, and so they are unsaleable.

The artist must be able to live off the work he produces.

In this way, art, like other human activities, would be able to fulfil its role properly and mankind would be more balanced, less anarchic and so stronger... THIS IS THE TRUE DISCIPLINE.

We are on the threshold of a classical period: THE AGE OF POLISHED STEEL. Those who feel this are the only ones who are AWARE.

We affirm that the work of art must be an autonomous work, able to be reproduced in millions of copies, thanks to the progress made in coloured photo-engraving. Do you think the man looking at a reproduction on a plane journey is interested in the decorative side of a plastic work of art?

More exhibitions, exchanges of works of art, so that people go to exhibitions like they go to the cinema. Big cosmopolitan cities, at night in the sky, illuminated signs: EXHIBITION: THE PAINTINGS OF X.

ON PAINTING

Aesthetics is not a means of finding the perfect solution to some problem, but it certainly is the essence of a particular problem: art.

The research carried out by most modern painters is the result of a grave mistake: they wish to determine the style of a painting a priori; now this style is the inevitable result of a well-made object: the union of the creative idea and its realization.

As for producing this work, a genius without means of expression is sterile; therefore a painter has to have a thorough mastery of the material resources at his disposal and use them strictly according to their own laws. He must be a skilful technician, the MASTER of his craft and not the SLAVE. Virtuosity is for idiots (in the pathological sense). The real job is in the layout, the choice of line, shape and colour, which will automatically

trigger aesthetic sensations, the picture's *raison d'être*. Consequently, the painter must be conscious, and not take on additional problems which will distract him.

A picture is a constructed object. It should be well constructed; that is a condition of life: precision, logic, economy, integrity; the mentality that is not satisfied with an approximation, that likes a circle to be drawn with a compass, that uses the most economic means to obtain the maximum effect – this is the way the work of a good workman is “finished”. The same objective in the field of physiology: the health of the organs through which life manifests itself. Even the weak feel the need for a structure; they keep their balance through contradiction (very fashionable).

Many painters use means that are not suitable for triggering aesthetic sensations, namely: anatomy, perspective, photographic images (accurate drawing), colour in *trompe l'œil*, didactic tendencies, the composition of historic, dramatic, comic “genre” scenes, etc.

We need: the anatomy of the painting and not the clinical anatomy of the sitter; drawing and colour must fit together precisely, not merely serve to give an effect of perspective; we need composition, which lies in the economy of surface, the rhythm, the life of the picture, the intellect ordering the construction of the creative idea expressed successfully.

When the creative idea needs perspective in order to be expressed satisfactorily, the painter must sacrifice the flat aspect of his canvas, for the canvas has to perform its duty, not the painter, and he does not paint merely in order to cover a canvas with colours, just as the poet does not write merely to cover the page with words.

The painter who uses a subject and takes it for his goal proves that he is not conscious of the reactions influencing him, which are therefore unconscious. An artist is moved by a passing train: this fact brings to life what was latent in the artist. A central core is then formed. An inner force develops it from the inside outwards, like a fetus. The work of art will see the light of day, like the child, when its organism is complete.

The discoveries made by the Cubist painters are significant: wishing to respect the properties of the canvas, the flat two-dimensional surface, they have rediscovered the unchanging laws of painting. But Cubist means can be useful in more than just the question of the two-dimensional: they are excellent building materials. Many Cubists take these means for ends: they make the same mistake as architects, they decide on the style of their painting a priori.

Albert Gleizes,* in his study on Cubism, has given a good definition of the work of art; unfortunately he also subordinates the creative idea to the look of the picture, even if it is accidental, since he affirms: “When a ray

of sunlight falls onto a two-dimensional picture, it is suddenly enriched logically by that ray of light.” A perfect picture cannot tolerate anything being added or taken away; a ray of sunlight, unforeseen by the painter, falling on a part of the painting, is an accident, as are reflections, flaws or the patina (dirt) of time.

“What one era thinks is bad is usually the out-of-date residue of what was once thought to be good – an atavistic attitude to an ideal that has aged.”
– Friedrich Nietzsche*

“Success comes from the streets; glory comes from the elite.”
– Remy de Gourmont*

There is evolution in art, as in everything. The contemporary public prefers the power saw to the flint saw, which was a brilliant discovery for its time, the best, perfection; but this same public does not recognize that art evolves, or they do so grudgingly.

People suppose that the image of an object is pictured in the same way in a man’s eyes, an ox’s eyes or in the open eyes of a corpse. This image is transmitted to the brain by the ocular nerves. So, our judgement of the object depends on the quality of the brain. If, compared to the average man, the ox is not considered competent to judge an object, the same comparison holds for the man in the herd and the artist. Genius, which is profoundly innovatory, is ahead of its time – or rather: it alone is of its time; the general public follows after, but is always at least a generation behind. The public does not acknowledge the value of a work of art without the sanction of time; hence the laughter and incomprehension at the efforts which the public calls mad and which will become classics, as all revolutions before them.

Our principles, which are rejected today, will be the dogmas with which people will try and demolish the young; they will be asked for the same explanations we were asked; yet, if a picture could be explained in words, words would suffice and the picture would be superfluous.

“In art, any value which can be justified is commonplace.”*

Aesthetic emotion is SUFFERED by the sensitive viewer.

THE PROBLEM OF PLASTIC ART MUST BE SOLVED TOOL IN HAND.

Unpublished manuscript by Victor Servranckx* and René Magritte in the Archives of Contemporary Art in Belgium, Brussels, 1922.

Norine* Blues

It's "Diabolical" and "Capricious", "Marquita" "Mitsou" dazzling dresses vaporous "Clouds" "Dew", divine Hydrangea "On the Wing" "Soft Night" Cocktail, "Let's Be Discreet", "Here Come the Flowers", "Pretty Roses" "Big Llama", "The Winner" was falling in love with "Geisha" to calm his "Neurosis" "Dream of India" "Blowing in the Wind" The "Golden Blues" are "Sparkling", "At the Wheel" I saw "Prince Igor" "Take Me Away" "Restless" "Flame" "Like Him" in a beautiful golden "Dream" O "Raja" I am so "Elegant!" Pretty dresses pretty names! "Colourful Fairyland" "Mad Passion" "In Full Bloom!"

Norine Blues: Pretty Dresses with Pretty Names. Created by Évelyne Brélia at the Kursaal, Ostend. Words by René Georges (i.e. René Magritte), music by Paul Magritte. Brussels, Musical Office, 1925, cover illustration by Magritte.

Texts from 39I

- In a dream,
- Brothels make a great impression,
- You'd think you were walking into a Conservatory.

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- Invalids justify Cubism.

*

The positive pole attracts the negative pole, since we live we love.

*

I like beer and hollyhocks.

*

A man in his birthday suit.

*

Cats are lucky to live under chairs.

*

The cow has feelings.

In 39I, Paris, no. 19, Oct. 1924, p. 130 of reprint; Paris, Terrain vague, 1960 (W 8).

Texts from *Période*

The ambassador
of a beautiful country
has the honour
of inviting you
to a big dinner party
The rooms will be candlelit.

In the Prospectus for the magazine (being planned), *Période*, at Mesens's house, Rue de Courtrai 55, Brussels (W 3). See Christian Bussy: *L'Accent grave*. Nougé aborted the project by disseminating, in Oct. 1924, a counter-prospectus where the text by Magritte became: "The ambassador / of a sombre country / has the honour / of asking you / to dinner / you have said / Our funerals will take place in the afternoon."

Texts from *Æsophage*

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS

1. Our policy is to practise self-destruction with all our might and to put our faith in human virtues.

2. All our collaborators must be good-looking, so we can publish their pictures.

3. We shall make a vigorous protest against all decadence: erudition, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Dadaism and its substitutes, cocaine, itching powder, compulsory education, polyrhythmia, polytonia, polynesia, carnal vices and, above all, homosexuality in all its forms.

4. Our freshness will not tolerate rotten tips, nor the wives of our friends.

5. We refuse under any circumstance to explain precisely what people won't understand.

Our venture is as far-fetched as our hopes. We shall take the greatest care over the most trivial things, we claim nothing, the love of our staff of young girls is more important.

“Here we go, Here we go!” That's our motto.

*

WHAT EVOLUTION CAN LEAD TO

Freedom that is unhampered by derision allows, with numerous exceptions, all ways of understanding the pictorial problem to be suitably represented (Impressionism, Renaissance, Copyism, Ornamentationism, etc.) and allows others a rapid and individual evolution. When beauty in its turn becomes unbearable, mere demolition workers can evolve no further, because they have nothing left to demolish. The prudent stop, deeming it necessary to represent something, moral suicide being less risky than the other. And it will be said: “That's where anarchy gets you.”

When the Will is no longer the slave of things, all seems lost, and it then becomes possible to realize images of a marvellous universe – creation – then to abandon them immediately – critical. For people are so serious that

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nothing is taken seriously any more except negation. And so evolution does not halt – it begins. We will often come within a hair's breadth of idiocy; never mind, it is pleasant to think where that may lead.

*

MM. Victor BIENTENHOLZ, Pierre DUPUIS, René MAGRITTE, E.L.T. MESENS and Paulus PROQUET* present ŒSOPHAGE.

WHY?

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SO MANY STARS MAY BLOW YOUR MIND BY CHANCE.

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URBAN PLANNING:

What will make me even more
sceptical is the billboard
for Rose Amy signed
by Orsi and the looks which
demand all the strength.*

In *Œsophage*, Brussels, one issue only. March 1925, no page numbers (W 15). Signed René Magritte and E.L.T. Mesens.

Texts from *Marie*

We must saw off the rungs of the ladder again.

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Do you still have the same shoulder?

In *Marie*, Brussels, no. 1. Jun. 1926, p. 1 (W 18).