

ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

# Art

ITS ORIGINS

AND SOCIAL

FUNCTION

by

PAUL MORTIER

CURRENT BOOK DISTRIBUTORS: SYDNEY



**ART**  
**ITS ORIGIN AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS**

# ART

## ITS ORIGINS AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

By Paul Mortier



Current Book Distributors  
Sydney  
October, 1955

## *Introduction*

Many workers are repelled by the bewildering range of theory and practice that they find in contemporary art, in all its media.

Each of these many formalist trends has its own theory. But they all have one characteristic in common:— they all distort art's relationship to material reality; they all divorce it from practical activity. "No politics in art" is their slogan.

These theories are a reflection of the general crisis gripping monopoly capitalism. They have a two way harmful effect: They degrade art, by squeezing out of it its historic social function of helping man in his struggle for emancipation; and they aim to isolate the working people from art, and thus deprive them of a very valuable weapon in their social struggles.

It is the aim of this pamphlet to help defeat some of these rotten ideas, and to help find the correct way to use art in the struggle against imperialism and for the building of Socialism.

### CHAPTER I.

## The Emergence of Consciousness

Art is essentially a human activity. It is an act of consciousness. As Engels warned us long ago, because we are used to seeing the products of consciousness— science, philosophy, art, etc.—appear to dominate reality we are inclined to lose sight of the real origins of consciousness.

We forget that consciousness is derivative from material things—we lapse into idealism and assume that consciousness has in fact created all things. Whereas of course, consciousness is itself a product of matter at a stage of its development. Human consciousness emerges only after aeons of development of animal life and it is qualitatively different from animal consciousness. Its emergence is a dialectical leap.

Marx has expressed this:

"The practical production of an objective world, the shaping of inorganic nature is proof of man as a conscious member of the species.

"To be sure animals also produce. They build nests, dwellings, etc., like bees, beavers, ants and others.

---

Registered at the G.P.O. Sydney, for Transmission by post as a book.

---

But they only produce for their own or their offsprings' immediate needs; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally; they produce only under the domination of immediate physical needs, while man produces independently of physical needs and really produces only when free of those needs. They produce only themselves, while man reproduces all nature; their product belongs directly to their own physical body, while man freely faces his product. Animals create according to the measure and need of the species, while man can produce according to the measure of every species, and can everywhere apply the inherent measure of the object.

"Hence, man also creates according to the laws of beauty."

The process giving rise to this human consciousness is brilliantly described by Engels in his "Transition from Ape to Man."

"Many hundreds of thousands of years ago, a specially highly developed race of anthropoid apes lived somewhere in the tropical zone . . . they were completely covered with hair, they had beards and pointed ears and they lived in bands in the trees . . . almost certainly as an immediate result of their modes of life, for in climbing hands fulfil quite a different function from the feet, these apes, when moving on the level ground began to drop the habit of using their hands and to adopt a more and more erect posture in walking.

"This was the decisive step in the transition from ape to man.

"For erect gait among our hairy ancestors to have become first the rule and, in time, a necessity, presupposes that in the meantime the hands became more and more devoted to other functions.

"Even among the apes there already prevails a certain separation in the employment of the hands and feet . . . At first, therefore, the operations for which our ancestors gradually learned to adapt their hands during the many thousands of years of transition from ape to man, could only have been very simple . . . before the first flint could be fashioned into a knife by human hands, a period of time must have elapsed in comparison with which the historical period known to us appears insignificant.

"But the decisive step was taken. The hand became

free and could henceforth attain ever greater dexterity and skill, and the greater flexibility thus acquired was inherited and increased from generation to generation.

"Thus, the hand is not only the organ of labor, it is also the product of labor. Only by labor, by adaptation to ever new operations, by the inheritance of the resulting special development of muscles, ligaments, and, over renewed periods of time, bones as well, and by the ever renewed employment of these inherited improvements in new and more complicated operations, has the human hand attained the high degree of perfection that has enabled it to conjure into being the pictures of Raphael, the statues of Thorwaldsen, the music of Paganini.

"But the hand did not exist by itself. What benefited the hand, benefited also the whole body served, and this in two ways:

"In the first place the body benefited in consequence of the law of correlation of growth, as Darwin called it . . . changes in certain forms involve changes in the form of other parts of the body. The gradual perfecting of the human hand . . . has undoubtedly also reacted on other parts of the organism—including the brain.

(Note—This hypothesis has been confirmed by modern biology.—P.M.)

"Much more important is the second way in which the hand affects the rest of the organism.

"The mastery over nature, which begins with the developments of the hand with labor, widened man's horizons at every new advance. He was continually discovering new properties of natural objects. On the other hand, the development of labor necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by multiplying cases of mutual support, joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual.

"In short, Men in the making arrived at the point where they had something to say to one another. The need led to the creation of its organ; the undeveloped larynx of the ape was slowly but surely transformed by means of gradually increased modulation, and the organs of the mouth gradually learned to pronounce one articulate letter after another. . . .

"First comes labor; after it, side by side with it, articulate speech—these were the two essential stimuli

under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man . . .

"Hand in hand with the development of the brain went the development of its most immediate instrument . . . the sense organs . . .

"The reaction of labor and speech on the development of the brain and its attendant senses on the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of abstraction and of judgment gives an ever renewed impulse to the further development of both labor and speech . . .

"By the co-operation of hands, organs of speech and brain, not only in each individual but also in society, human beings became capable of executing more and more complicated operations, of setting themselves and achieving higher and higher aims . . . Labor itself became different, more perfect, more diversified."

This brilliant work by Engels is the clearest exposition yet of the Marxist concept of how consciousness was developed to the level where artistic creation became possible.

It is important to note two particular aspects of it.

Firstly, the concept of consciousness in Engels' work is a two-sided one.

Consciousness is a dialectical unity of intellect and sense perceptions, of thought and feeling. As man's brain develops and his power to generalise and deduce grows, it requires more of "its immediate instruments, the senses."

And, of course, as the senses develop, become more sensitive and able to give a clearer picture of reality to the brain, they naturally set the brain more complex tasks of generalisation, they stimulate further development in the brain.

The idealists in art (and in science too) distort all this. They deny any real connection between art and life. Flowing from this, they obscure the real nature of cognition, metaphysically building a Chinese wall between intellect and sensation.

Picasso, for example, in his cult of cubism elevates intellect as against the senses: Matisse, the senses as against the intellect. Both distort reality, and because of their common incorrect basis, have elements of each other's distortion.

As we have said the basis of this distortion is the attempt to separate art from life.

It is a distortion of the relationship between consciousness and the material environment in which consciousness functions.

As Engels shows, man's consciousness evolved and developed as part of the process of mastering nature. The history of consciousness is at the same time the history of human freedom. Freedom varies directly with man's understanding of and control over natural law.

It has been aptly defined by Engels as "the recognition of necessity."

But the bourgeois theorists stand this on its head—they equate ignorance with freedom.

For example, the French art critic, Maurice Raynal, praises the work of the French sculptor, Lipchitz, because "his aim is to keep instincts and desires intact in the form in which man gave expression to them at the time of his first appearance on earth."

This theme of uninhibited instincts as the quintessence of freedom runs right through the whole of Imperialist aesthetics and psychology. It serves their need to brutalise man, but it is completely unscientific.

As instinct is an innate tendency to act in a certain way under a given stimulus. A bee instinctively stores honey. Throughout its life history it has been engaged in mortal combat with another insect, the Philanthus.

Uncountable millions of bees have been killed by Philanthi, while sipping honey from flowers alongside their enemies.

But the bee is incapable of learning to take even the elementary precaution of flying away.

Another example. The moth, known as the Oak Eggar, seeks out the female of the species under the stimulus of an emanation from the female. But J. H. Fabre records how the males will fly right past the females, in clear sight under a bell jar, to a piece of flannel saturated with the female's effluvium.

This then is the "freedom" beloved of the bourgeois decadents.

This is the goal to which they would lead us—back from consciousness to instinct—back from homo sapiens to the beast and beyond that to the insects.

## CHAPTER 2.

# Art and the Labor Process

Art is one manifestation of consciousness. Just as consciousness itself emerges and develops in inseparable connection with the labor process, so does art.

This is perfectly obvious in all primitive art. Here it is directly part of production. The rock drawings and corroborations of the aborigines, for example, play a vital part in their primitive mode of production.

In their hunting dances, the dancers create an image of the movements and habits, say, of an emu. The dance selects what is typical (what "most fully and vividly expresses its essence" —Malenkov) about the emu, thereby heightening all that the tribe needs to know in order effectively to hunt it. In doing so, they stimulate the tribe to hunt.

Their rock drawings perform a similar role. Failure to see this leads bourgeois art critics into the most absurd confusion. A few years ago, great interest was aroused by the discovery in Altamira, Spain, of rock drawings dating back to the Palaeolithic era, right in humanity's infancy.

These drawings are characterised by their most vivid capturing of motion.

Idealist attempts to explain these drawings are grotesque.

English critic, Eric Newton, admits his bewilderment.

"Until the late 19th century," he writes on page 47 of his *European Painting and Sculpture* (Penguin edition) "when, influenced by the camera, artists began to specialise in capturing the swift momentary gesture, only a few exceptional draughtsmen had been capable of making this kind of drawing. How Palaeolithic man managed to do it is a mystery."

His fellow Englishman, Roger Fry, is not so modest. He "explains" the mystery:

"It would seem not impossible that the very perfection of vision and presumably of the other senses with which the Bushman and Palaeolithic man were endowed, fitted them so perfectly to their surroundings that there was no necessity to develop the mechanical arts, beyond the elementary instruments of the chase.

"We must assume that Neolithic man, on the other

hand, was less perfectly adapted to his surroundings, but that his sensual defects were more than compensated for by an increased intellectual power." (*Vision and Design*, Page 84, Penguin edition.)\*

Here we have expressed in its crudest form, the theory to which I have already referred. According to Fry, intellect varies inversely to sensual powers. Therefore, if we were deaf, dumb, blind and nerveless our intellects would be gigantic.

Naturally, based on such an absurd proposition, Fry's "explanation" only raises more mysteries. If Palaeolithic man was fitted "so perfectly to his environment" how did his culture ever become supplanted?

To a Marxist there is no mystery in all of this. The primitive rock drawings are brilliantly realistic because they were part of a labor process based on hunting.

Their social function depended on their selection of the typical in the movement of the bison and other game—their skill in draughtsmanship arose from that necessity.

The character of art is clear in its primitive forms. Artistic creations are images of reality, so crystallising reality as to facilitate and stimulate social action for the changing of that reality in a required direction.

Art is an expression of collective emotions and aspirations. It is part of the superstructure whose base is the relations man enters into in the course of production and reproduction of material things.

Art is born as a collective activity... the aboriginal corroborations... the earliest Greek drama... etc.

But, of course, art is affected by the division of labor which flows from man's growing knowledge of nature. Even among the Aborigines, the individual artist is well established. Dancers and story tellers whose skill wins them invitations from the neighbouring tribes are noted by many students of the aborigines.

But these individuals are artists only to the extent that they are able to express the collective idea and fulfill the social need.

With the break up of society into classes, the collective ceases to be the whole of society and becomes in-

\* (FOOTNOTE.—In a footnote, Fry asserts that his hypothesis on palaeolithic man "is certainly the case with Australian aborigines." This arrogant and absurd assertion highlights the need for Marxist study of aboriginal culture.)

stead the class whose interest the art serves. In class society, therefore, art is always class art—art is always a weapon serving a particular class in struggle with its rivals.

## CHAPTER 3. Slave Art

From that point art's development proceeds in two streams—the art of the ruling class or classes and the art of the exploited masses.

Thus when we speak of Greek Art we usually refer to art that expressed the aspirations of the slaveowners. It was an art which grew rich in technique because its practitioners, maintained by the labor of the slaves, were able to devote their whole time to perfecting the vehicles for their ideas.

So long as their ideas and aspirations were towards historically necessary ends, so long did their art grow and mature.

By the Periclean era in Athens, art had achieved a level which in many respects still has not been surpassed.

But the crisis of slavery rapidly expressed itself in art. This is true in a particular as well as in a general sense. The history of Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman etc. art is at the same time a history of the rise and fall of these various slave civilisations.

This is very clearly seen in the case of Rome, whose decline marked the end of slavery as a dominant social system. The two or three centuries, which have "the birth of Christ" as their centre are the days of Rome's greatest glories. While prevented by the general crisis of slavery from achieving the heights of the Greek city states, Roman art of this period was rich and fruitful.

Horace, Virgil and dozens of others famed in the annals of art lived in this period.

But at the same time the seeds of the final destruction of slavery were being sown. Productive forces were reaching the stage where slave relations were a fetter.

The process expressed itself in most complex class struggles—the punic wars had on the one hand dispossessed a large number of the free peasants who had founded Rome, and driven them into the cities as propertyless but free Plebs; and on the other hand enriched a handful of large slaveholding landowners, the Patricians. Civil

wars were fought between these two classes continuously for 100 years. And at the same time there were the unceasing efforts of the slaves to free themselves, of which the Spartacus revolt was the most dramatic and the nearest to succeed.

These class tensions eventually threw up the emperorship—resting its power precariously on the tense balance between these class forces. Emperors became "absolute" in relation to these classes; but grew ever more dependent on the army which by the first century AD was appointing and deposing them almost at will.

Differentiation occurs among the slaves, a few finding important places in the state apparatus, many being transformed into serfs, and yet others into proletarians. Demoralisation spreads among the ruling classes, expressing itself in many new ideologies, most of which are crystallised in Christianity.

Underlying all this was the rapid decay of productive forces. Huge areas of land were lost to agriculture, water reticulation systems fell into disuse; industry decayed. Continuous foreign and internal wars ate away the soul of Rome.

The result was an almost complete destruction of slave art.

Painting which had reached high peaks in Athens and Alexandria virtually ceased to exist in the west.

Sculpture, the glory of Periclean Athens and to a lesser degree of Augustan Rome, disappears for centuries.

From the heights scaled by the dramatists and philosophers of Greece, literature descends to the hills of the Augustan poets, survives for a couple of centuries in the historians, and then dies.

But the other stream of art, that of the oppressed masses, flows on.

The masses were the saviours of art. They preserved music in their folk songs, theatre in their folk dances and literature in their folk tales.

When the Feudal mode of production has finally achieved some form of stability in about the 10th century, it is from this healthy stream that the new ruling class art drinks.

The minstrel and jester, essential features of Feudal social life illustrate this point. So do the Anglo-Saxon chronicles of Beowulf and other folk stories to which all modern literature trace their roots.



## CHAPTER 4

# The Renaissance

This phenomenon presents itself so regularly in the history of art, that it might be called a law. At nodal points of social development, the new rising class fuses much of the folk art with the techniques and forms developed by educated ruling classes to mould an art which will express their own progressive or revolutionary aspirations.

It was a feature of the renaissance. The precursors of bourgeois literature drew on the vernaculars in which the common people told their tales and on the tales themselves for such works as the Decameron. The composers found in the folk songs of the minstrels material with which to supplant the Gregorian chant; and so on.

And the renaissance is a graphic illustration of the relationship that art as a part of the superstructure bears to the social base.

It commenced in Italy where geographical and other factors had allowed the embryonic capitalists to be the first to achieve class consciousness.

During a period of about three centuries the city states of Italy, situated on all the main trade routes had in alliance with the "merchant princes" wrested liberties from the Feudal lords.

In this period Dante, Boccaccio, Giotto, Leonardo, Michael Angelo, Palaestrini, The Comedia Del Arte and countless other masters in every field of art flourished.

In magnificent artistic images they began to satirise the church, and express a consciousness of nationhood, a new awareness of man and nature and other concepts hostile to feudal ideas.

It should be noted however that the development was not even over the whole three centuries, and that a real leap was taken between 1480 and 1550.

By this time the development of commodity production as well as trade had reached levels to justify Engels' statement that Italy was the first capitalist nation.

In those 70 years the renaissance reached its full bloom. Of it Engels said: "Italy rose to undreamed of flowering of art which seemed like a reflection of classical antiquity and was never attained again . . . It was

the greatest progressive revolution that mankind has so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants . . . giants in the power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning.

"The men who founded the modern rule of the bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations. On the contrary, the adventurous character of the time inspired them to a greater or lesser degree." (Dialectics of Nature.)

The cutting of the trade routes by the Turkish capture of Constantinople in 1453 raised the need to find new ones. In the search, Columbus, Magellan and others performed wonders of navigation. In the process they weakened the base of the Italian capitalists by diverting trade from their city states. Within a century the glories of Italian renaissance art were no more.

The centre of capitalist development shifted to Spain, England, the Netherlands — countries occupying key positions on the new trans-oceanic trade routes.

In all those countries, as the Capitalist class becomes conscious of itself art becomes transformed to convey their ideas. (In Spain, the development was cut off by the temporary victory of the Counter-revolution.)

The Elizabethan period was a nodal point in this process in England.

It produced a rich crop of brilliant men, the greatest of whom was Shakespeare.

His genius created drama peopled with men and women who typified the class relations and tensions of his epoch.

He wrote an historical cycle which "justified" the Tudors' claim to the throne . . . in his early comedies and comedy dramas he proclaimed the new ethic of the capitalist class. But he was at his greatest in his tragedies.

These were written in the period from 1600 to 1610.

In 1588, the merchant capitalists had achieved a decisive victory over Feudal Spain's counter revolutionary armada.

The alliance with the Tudor monarchy, product of the whole 16th century had paid its dividends. The Venetian and German trade rivals, who had hung on in their London depot, the Steelyard, had finally been routed.

Merchants organised in such groups as the Association of Merchant Adventurers, of which Good Queen

Bess was a shareholder, were looting the new world and returning profits of from 600 to 700% per voyage.

Capitalist production was beginning to spread. These developments demanded new adjustments to the alliance with the crown.

Queen Elizabeth, for example, was pressed and reluctantly agreed to forego her right to grant trade monopolies to her favorites.

Tensions therefore were inevitable. But they were heightened by the death of Elizabeth and the accession to the throne of James VI of Scotland.

He had no patience with and no understanding of the Merchant capitalists.

He resented their demands and tried to extract from them an explicit admission of his "divine right" to rule.

Feeling their opposition he sought support from the then spearhead of reaction—Feudal Spain.

By 1612, The Spanish ambassador was virtual dictator in London.

The class relations, which had inspired Shakespeare had passed. He wrote no more after about 1611.

In Shakespeare's tragedies, he fused the class emotions of the young capitalists into individuals to create the richest gallery of characters in literature.

Yearning for a strong monarch to protect them from feudal lawlessness; greed and ambition; vacillation arising from distrust of the monarch on whom they must rely; ruthlessness, a quality recognised as necessary but still not created by history . . . and so on. These were the emotions and aspirations which found artistic expression in the tragedies, creations in which thought and feeling were fused to inspire the bourgeoisie to the political tasks facing them.

But because at that time, as in Italy earlier, the bourgeoisie were standing at the head of an awakening people, Shakespeare was able to transcend the limitations of the capitalists. Rooted to that class, his genius flowered and spread beyond its confines. It belongs to all men.

And to-day, because of its profound humanism, the Capitalists, in their death throes, are uneasy in its presence. It is to the workers in the Soviet Union and Peoples' Democracies that Shakespeare now speaks with full significance.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Action and Interaction

This does not mean, of course, that developments in productive forces are simply paralleled in art.

"The further the particular sphere which we are investigating is removed from the economic sphere and approaches that of pure abstract ideology, the more shall we find it exhibiting accidents in its development, the more will its curve assume a zig-zag.

"But if you plot the average axis of the curve you will find that the axis of the curve will approach more and more nearly parallel to the axis of the curve of economic development, the longer the period considered and the wider the field dealt with." (Engel's letter to Heinz Starkenburg, January 25, 1894, in Mark and Engels on Art and Literature . . . P 14, CBD edition.)

The relations between the base and the superstructure are not a passive mechanical connection but a dialectical interaction.

Men make their own history, and in making it they are influenced by contemporary ideas and by ideas from the past.

Early Australian poetry, for example, is heavily stomped with imagery taken bodily from England and tacked on to Australians conditions.

Here is an example from Kendall's "September in Australia."

"The ways of the frost have been filled of the flowers,

While the forest discovers

Wild wings, with the halo of hyaline hours.

And the music of lovers.

"September, the maid with the swift, silver feet!

She glides and she graces

The valleys of coolness, the slopes of the heat,

With her blossomy traces;

Sweet month, with a mouth that is made of a rose,

She lightens and lingers

In spots where the harp of the evening glows,

Attuned by her fingers."

These words hardly meet the requirements of the rugged grandness of Australia—they are attuned to the softness of a different land.

Yet Kendall loved Australia and had faith in it, as expressed in his song to Caroline Chisholm:

"God's servant came forth from the South: she told of a plentiful land;

And wisdom was set in her mouth, and strength in the thews of her hand.

She lifted them out of their fear, and they thought her their Moses and said:

'We shall follow you sister, from here to the country of sunshine and bread.'

This inability to cope with the new environment was not an individual weakness. It was shared by all the writers and painters of that time.

Adam Lindsay Gordon could speak of "lands where blossoms are scentless, and songless bright birds."

Conrad Martens could lend great love to his Sydney Harbor, and Louis Buvelot to his Waterpool at Coleraine, but neither painter captured Australia.

Part of the problem, no doubt, lay in the strangeness of the environment . . . its light, coloring, fauna and flora so different from Europe.

But the main reason, I believe, lies in the strength of past ideas . . . ideas imported from England and Europe, which could not be finally dispelled until the material conditions had been created in the new country.

In Australia at this time, there was growing a real national pride among the working people, as reflected in their folk songs and yarns. The poets and painters express this pride and affection.

But, as Stalin once said, the Nation is born in the market place. The squatters did not cease to look on England as "home" until capital accumulation had reached a definite stage. It was directly in proportion to the need for stable markets for the ever growing output from Australian farms and factories that the idea of Nationalism and Federation gained adherence from the squatters and capitalists.

By the 90's a new stage had been reached in this process. Australian nationalism came of age, and the art forms reflect it.

There is nothing nostalgic about Lawson or Collins, Roberts or McCubbin.

An Australian art has emerged.

## CHAPTER 6.

### Another Law

Technically, it is true, Australian painters learned much from the new approach to problems of light and landscape adopted by the French post-impressionists.

But the French post-impressionists mark a beginning of the divorcement of the artist from his fellow men.

The Australian artists, on the contrary, possessed a deep love of their own country and belief in the men and women who peopled it. They were the first great realists in Australian painting.

This illustrates a law formulated by Plekhanov:

"The influence of the literature of one country on the literature of another is directly proportional to the similarity of the social relations of these countries." (In *Defence of Materialism*, Plekhanov, P 204, Lawrence and Wishart, 1947.)

In 1890, Australian capitalism was still a healthy organism. It transformed the art emanating from the diseased body of French imperialism.

But decadent French bourgeois art deeply influences Australian art to-day, and there is no such metamorphosis . . . because the general crisis of capitalism is now very far advanced in Australia too."

## CHAPTER 7.

### Inhumanity—the Keynote

By its very nature, art, in class societies, expresses the aspiration of a particular class—is a weapon of a particular class.

But this does not mean that all artists consciously fulfill such a function. Picasso is a member of the French Communist Party and has a valiant record of struggle against the Imperialists. Matisse is an honored member of the peace movement. But they are rightly regarded as the leading bourgeois artists of the day.

To varying degrees, thousands of artists who reject or oppose the standards and aims of the capitalists nevertheless continue to express bourgeois ideas. This is not surprising. As long as capitalism exists it produces a constant stream of ideas that conform with its ethics.

It requires constant and vigorous ideological struggle on the part of the working class to defeat these ideas.

So an artist can warrant the description "bourgeois artist" even though he has no intention of helping capitalism.

"What makes them representatives of the petit-bourgeoisie," Marx wrote of the petit-bourgeois ideologists of 19th Century France, "is the fact that in their minds, they do not go beyond the limits which the latter do not go beyond in life; that they are constantly driven theoretically to the same tasks and solutions to which material interest and social position practically drive the latter.

"That is, in general, the relationship of the political and literary representatives of a class to the class they represent." (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. P. 44, New York International Publishers.)

And in the same work Marx develops this idea:

"Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence rises an entire superstructure of distinct and characteristically formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life.

"The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations.

"The single individual who derives them through tradition and education may imagine they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity . . . And as in private life one distinguishes between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, still more in historical struggles must one distinguish between the phrases and fancies of the parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality." (ibid, pp40, 41.)

The capitalists to-day move within very narrow limits. Based on decay, they constantly face economic crisis, to which the only alleviation they can see is war.

For the people they can offer nothing but mass starvation or mass annihilation. Their artists imprisoned in this dark and airless cell resort to defeatism, cynicism and obscurantism. Nearly 100 years ago, Marx foretold the present ideological plight of the capitalists when he wrote:

"Society has until now always developed within the

confines of some kind of contradiction: in ancient times it was the contradiction between freemen and slaves, in the Middle Ages between the nobility and serfs, and in modern times—between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

"This explains on the one hand, the abnormal, 'inhuman' way in which the oppressed class has to satisfy its needs, and on the other—the restriction within which the development of social communion takes place, and with it, the development of the whole ruling class; this restriction on development consists, thus, not only in the exclusion of the oppressed class from development, but also the intellectual limitation it imposes on the class that does the excluding—so that it, too, the ruling class, is doomed to become 'inhuman.'" (Quoted by Kamenev, in *Aspects of Two Cultures*, Voks, No. 52, 1947 from Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 4, pp 419-420, Russian edition.)

This inhumanity dominates artistic creation and criticism of the capitalist class.

The American magazine *Life*, on December 2, 1946, expressed it this way: "For the ancient Greeks, man was the centre of the universe; modern man has reduced his significance to the level of an ordinary biological creature."

That is a creed which conforms perfectly with the imperialist concept that man is merely cannon fodder.

The same idea is expressed even more crudely by French critic, Maurice Raynal, to whose comments on the sculptor, Lipschitz, I have already referred.

In the same article, he writes:

". . . he regards the adaptations stemming from certain victories of reason as adaptation which must necessarily disappear or be supplanted as doubtful acquisitions whereas the only eternal truth is represented by homogenous original and primitive expression of human nature."

In short, back to the animal level! Raynal's "eternal truth" finds practical expression in the policy of the US war planners.

It is echoed by General Douglas MacArthur, saying as he gazed at the murdered bodies of Korean patriots, "There is a fine sight for my old eyes."

And by General Boatner gloating "hot dog, hot dog,"

as unarmed prisoners of war run to escape American flame throwers.

Our minds are constantly beset by this kind of poison, unleashed by frightened men trying to stop the march of history.

Some artists, who purvey it, do not do so consciously. But to counter it we need artists who consciously express the aims and aspirations of the working class—the class destined by history to lead men from such animal remnants into full human consciousness.

We need artists who are willing to fight for truth and against the enemies of truth. This requires artists who are conscious of their class alignment.

## CHAPTER 8.

### The Artist and the Class

It has always been true that artists who understand their own class position are made greater artists by that knowledge.

As Engels said of the geniuses of the Renaissance:

"What is especially characteristic of them is that they almost all pursue their lives and activities in the midst of the contemporary movement, in the practical struggle; they take sides and join in the fight, one by speaking and writing, another with the sword, many with both.

"Hence, the fullness and force of character that makes them complete men.

"Men of the study are the exception—either persons of second or third rank or cautious philistines who do not want to burn their fingers." (Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*.)

The same is true of Milton, the great epic poet of the English language.

Living in the period of the Bourgeois revolution, he was so class-conscious, such a militant party man, that for 20 years he wrote no poetry—only pamphlets, because they were needed by his class.

Henry Lawson is another example.

His best work was produced when he was playing an active part in the mass struggles of the Labor movement at the end of the 19th Century.

As already mentioned, the 90's marked a nodal in Australian development.

In 1889, the price of wool began to fall. The employers were organised nationally in preparation for the "great clashes between capital and labor," which they foresaw must come.

Capitalism had come of age.

Industrially this expressed itself in the great strikes of the 90's, politically in the Socialism of William Lane and his Paraguayan Utopia, the birth of the Labor Party and the attempt to neutralise the state; artistically it brought forth the great democratic national art of Lawson, Collins, Roberts and coy.

It finds its sharpest expression in the poetry of Lawson.

In poems such as *Men Who Made Australia*, *Freedom on the Wallaby*, and others, he gave voice to the budding class consciousness of the workers.

The concept of mateship, nourished by the nature of the country and the social conditions since the foundation of Australia, began to take on a new militancy.

The workers became conscious that trade union struggle had to be supplemented by political action. This was still not revolutionary consciousness. They still saw something accidental in their class conflicts—they did not understand the historical necessity of class struggle.

They had no vision of themselves as liberators of mankind, leaders of humanity into a classless society.

It took more than one upheaval to destroy illusions nurtured over 100 years.

The machine had gone a little awry, but a minor adjustment would surely fix it. With those concepts, the Labor Party was founded.

Lawson saw further than the majority of his contemporaries. But inevitably he shared the limitations of his class. So that even in a fine militant poem like *Camberoora Star*, we find lines of filthy chauvinism.

In much of Lawson's best work there is confusion and even pessimism.

(It is not the purpose of this essay to trace the roots of these weaknesses in detail; but it is necessary to mention them because it was these roots that grew when the social soil and climate changed.)

After the defeats suffered in the great strikes, a mood of pessimism gripped the working class. This was only partly alleviated by the high hopes held in the Labor Party. (The leading Socialists deserted to William Lane's Paraguayan Utopia).

By this time, Lawson had become a national figure and much sought after by literary and bourgeois circles.

Sharing the pessimism caused by the trade union defeats Lawson, under the influence of these strange circles, began to lose faith in the working class. He became divorced from the workers, the source of his genius.

Furthermore, capitalism was rapidly maturing. By the end of the 1st World War it had made considerable progress in the development of heavy industry and had acquired its own imperialist ambitions.

The Trade Union ideas and naive nationalism of the 90's were dangerously inadequate for the working class in this new situation.

The need for a revolutionary class consciousness and proletarian internationalism was answered in 1920 by the formation of the Communist Party.

But Lawson in his isolation took no part in this maturing of the working class.

Shackled by the petit-bourgeois ideas of the 90's, and isolated from the maturing working class, Lawson took no part in this new movement.

He vacillated between chauvinism (England Yet, Coronation Ode, etc.) and nostalgic defeatism (I'm Too Old to Rat, Sweeney, etc.)

Today, when the last great class battles are being fought out, every artist is faced sharply with the realities of his class position.

Those who seek to retain material comforts from the capitalists and yet deny their kinship with that class end in disaster. Steinbeck, Priestly, John Ford and a thousand others are hideous illustrations.

Those who seek to avoid contact with the "unclean" proletariat and yet purport to despise the capitalists, end in the bog of formalism and obscurantism.

The artist who loves humanity inevitably finds himself allied with the working class. The future of art, as of humanity, rests in their hands.

## CHAPTER 9

### Soviet Art

In the Soviet Union, the great flowering in every artistic sphere is adequate expression of the working class's creative genius.

There, art performs a vital role, moulding men's souls for the historic task of building Communism.

The mighty achievements of the people, led by the working class and its vanguard, the Communist Party, provide the artists with bottomless springs of inspiration.

And the clean, sharp knife of Marxist criticism cuts away every cancer that would obscure the artist's vision or hinder him in creating adequate vehicles for society's glorious aspirations.

The rapid development of Soviet society raises special problems for the artist.

He cannot recreate reality in the leisured manner of some painters; but has to be able to capture it with the speed of a news photographer.

Sholokov wrote *Virgin Soil Uplifted* only 20 years ago. It dealt then with a hot contemporary issue. Today it is an historical novel.

This speed of development constantly presents artists with new problems—and criticism and self criticism are a vital law in this as in all other aspects of development.

Nor are Soviet writers and artists deterred by attempts to distort their efforts in this regard.

The recent Soviet Writers' Congress was devoted almost entirely to self critical examination of the weaknesses of Soviet Literature.

The Capitalist press, tried to isolate part of this and hold it up as a proof of the barrenness of Soviet art creation.

But the flood of novels, poems, plays, music, painting which flows from all corners of the Soviet Union gives them the lie.

They seek comfort in the absence of a Leo Tolstoy or a Nicolai Gogol from the Soviet Literary scene.

But as Ilya Ehrenburg said in one of his critical essays, "The Writer and his Craft;"

"Soviet society is now in the early morn of its development; in history a few decades are but a brief hour. Our writers are like scouts.

"That is why we do not yet have a Pushkin or a Tolstoy. But we shall have. Our Zenith is still before us."

The Soviet people are achieving the highest levels of artistic creation in the history of man.

They are creating Socialist Realism, which sets itself tasks such as those outlined by Malenkov in his report to the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

"Soviet people refuse to accept falsehood, mediocrity, art that has no message; the demands they make on our writers and artists are exacting.

"In their works, our writers and artists must castigate the evils, sores and defects that exist in society and, in positive images, depict the new type of people in all the magnificence of their human dignity and thereby help to train in the people of our society characters, habits and customs that are free from the evils and vices engendered by capitalism . . .

"Our Soviet Literature and art must boldly portray the contradictions and conflicts in life: they must learn to use the weapon of criticism as an effective means of education.

"The vitality and importance of realistic art lies in that it can and must discover and bring to light the lofty spiritual qualities and typical positive features in the character of the ordinary man and woman, and create artistic images of them, images that will be examples to others.

"In creating artistic images our artists and writers must always bear in mind that the typical is not only what is most often met with.

"Typical is that which most fully and vividly expresses the essence of the given social force. In the Marxist-Leninist conception of the term, typical does not mean the statistical average.

"Typicalness corresponds to the essence of the given social-historical phenomenon and is not simply what is most widespread, often met with, the ordinary.

"A deliberately magnified image, brought out in salient relief, does not exclude typicalness; it reveals the typical more fully and emphasises it.

"Typicalness is the main sphere of the manifestation of partisanship in realistic art. The problem of typicalness is always a political problem."

## CHAPTER 10

# Form and Content

There are two aspects of this masterly analysis by Malenkov that need stressing.

One is the relationship between form\* and content in a work of art.

They are a dialectical unity; it is the unity and interpenetration of these opposites that constitutes the inner mainspring of artistic development.

Marx once said, "My property is my form, it is my spiritual individuality." (see footnote.)

An artist is an individual through whom social aspirations find expression. He seeks to create images of reality, or recreate reality, to reveal its many sidedness, to facilitate and encourage social action upon it.

But the artist is part of that reality—his consciousness is a product of that reality. He cannot entirely separate reality from himself (i.e. achieve absolute objectivity) any more than he can remove himself from reality. (absolute subjectivism.)

His artistic creations are therefore a fusion of individual consciousness with objective social reality. Art is a synthesis of the objective and the subjective. It is this synthesis that expresses itself in the dialectical unity of form and content.

Form is "spiritual individuality," but it is socially created. It grows and develops in response to the demands of changing reality.

Styles, mannerisms, adopted by individual artists, which do not assist in expressing the social emotion, in clarifying reality, are socially rejected.

FOOTNOTE\*: Those who assert that Marxism rejects form should study this impassioned plea by Marx. "You admire the delightful variety, the most inexhaustible wealth of nature. You do not demand that a rose should have the same scent as a violet; but the richest of all, the spirit, is to be allowed to exist in ONLY ONE form? I am a humorist, but the law orders me to write seriously. I am bold, but the law orders my style to be modest. Gray and more gray, that is the only authorised color of freedom. Every dewdrop in which the sun is reflected, glitters with an inexhaustible display of colors, but the sun of the spirit may break into ever so many different individuals and objects, yet it is permitted to produce only one color, the official color." (Marx and Engels on Literature and Art, CBD edition page 46, On Style.)

Those that do are accepted and become a part of mankind's heritage. Thus forms arise.

One example will illustrate this. Two art critics, William Orpen and Frank Rutter have described the main achievements of the Renaissance in Painting as being:

(1) The study of perspective, linear and aerial; and  
(2) the study of anatomy of nude bodies in repose and action.

These are accurate observations. But they are superficial—they see only the formal aspects.

Why did artists suddenly begin to find an interest in these forms?

Because the renaissance was characterised by a profound humanism.

A resurgent people led by the capitalists manifested a profound curiosity about man and nature.

The fetters of feudalism were clothed in mysticism, and contempt for man. The flat, lifeless representations in feudal art corresponded with the concepts propagated by the ruling class.

Man was a vassal. The various orders of bondage were eternally fixed—from the King who owed allegiance only to God to the humblest serf whose reverence for the divinity was supposed to find proper expression only through absolute subservience to all the higher social orders.

In fighting against these ideas, inherently hostile to commodity production, the capitalists were able to place themselves at the head of all the oppressed classes. Hence, the humanism of the renaissance goes beyond bourgeois limits.

These new ideas, this new content, demanded new forms and the new forms were found. Hence the perspective and anatomy.

Just as consciousness is a product of developing matter, so form is constantly emerging from changing content. In this sense, content is primary, decisive.

But there can be no Chinese wall between form and content, any more than between consciousness and material reality, or between intellect and senses.

Form is derived from content but it reacts back and helps to determine content.

A correct form strengthens and develops a content. An incorrect form weakens and retards the content.

An artistic creation stimulates action on reality.

The starting point in criticism is in which direction does it stimulate action. If it impels mankind to brutality and degeneracy, it is bad, socially dangerous art. And in this case, the more closely form and content correspond, the more dangerous is the art.

And conversely if it impels man onwards, the greater the correspondence of the form and content the greater is the impact of the idea expressed—the greater is the art.

Hence today, more than in any previous period, the appraisal of art is a political question.

We live in the epoch of "moribund" capitalism. The capitalists have no aspirations other than to power, to cling to their money bags. Doomed by history, they know only despair, contempt for humanity and hatred for reason and truth. Their art impels towards brutality.

On the other hand, the working class, and the working people whom it leads, have a glorious future, in which they can liberate themselves not only from the ruling class that now oppresses them, but also from the forces of nature which now dominate us.

Their art evokes love of humanity, confidence in its future, determination to win such a future. It is the art of peace, socially useful art.

There are no in betweens today. The struggle that dominates all reality is too sharp to allow of eclecticism. One is either for peace or for war. For life or death.

## CHAPTER II. Allies in Art

And that brings us to the second question—narrowness or sectarianism in art.

The working class has the responsibility of leadership in art as in all fields of human endeavour. The working class is the only consistently revolutionary class in society. Its relations to the means of production determine that it will lead mankind to Socialism.

The working class needs a socialist realistic art.



which will not only expose the evils of modern capitalism, but will at the same time reveal the positive germs of the future.

Capitalism itself has been forced to provide certain objective factors essential for the mass building of such an art. More complicated instruments of production demanded a literate working class, and so a limited education was opened to the working people.

Furthermore, the tremendous development in productive forces achieved by progressive capitalism created conditions in which the working class was able to win more leisure; and thus use their education for more than merely improving their profit making capacity for the boss.

But narrowness or sectarianism will only hinder the building of such a Socialist Realist art.

Appreciation of the need for a specifically working class art does not imply rejection of all non-working class art.

The class relations of today were accurately foretold by Marx: "No class in civil society can play this part unless it calls forth a phase of enthusiasm in its own ranks and those of the masses: a phase when it... is identified with society, is felt and recognised to be the universal representative of society, and when its own demands and rights are really the demands and rights of society itself, and it is in truth the social head and the social heart..."

"The position of liberator cannot be taken by storm simply through revolutionary energy and intellectual self-confidence.

"If the emancipation of a particular class is to be identified with the revolution of a people, if one social class is to be treated as the whole social order, then on the other hand, all the deficiencies of society must be concentrated in another class; a definite class must be the universal stumbling block, the embodiment of universal fetters." (Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegelian Philosophy of Law, quoted by Plekhanov in In Defence of Materialism, P. 198, Lawrence & Wishart, 1947.)

Today, to monopoly capitalists, who need war and have no future are the "universal stumbling block, the

embodiment of universal fetters." And the working class is the head and heart of society.

Consequently, its aspirations are not narrow but embrace the aspirations of all other classes except the universal stumbling block.

Consequently the working class can accept and in fact needs the support of the art of allied classes.

The point was well made by Joseph Revai, a Political Committee member of the Hungarian Communist Party in a discussion there some years ago:

"The struggle for the adherents of literature and for the realisation of the principle of Party literature does not exclude the possibility of having fellow travellers and allies on the literary front... we do not close our eyes to the class limitations of our classical realists and to the weaknesses that arise from them, but we also know that their work and importance... cannot be characterised and understood from these class limitations alone..."

"As early as 1925, the Bolshevik Party emphasised it is necessary to exercise the greatest tact, the greatest patience, towards those literary circles which can and will go hand in hand with the proletariat."

## CHAPTER II.

### Conclusion

While it is not the function of this essay to traverse the organisational political tasks facing the working class in the sphere of art, it would be incorrect not to mention at least their main aspects:

Communists have a leading responsibility in the fulfilment of these tasks.

We must create a body of work that adequately expresses the aspirations of the working class and its allies, and that will inspire them in the struggles ahead. Communist Party organisations should assist our artists in the choices of themes and suggest particular projects, without inhibiting of course the artist's freedom of choice in this matter.

We must create conditions for the release of the mass creative initiative in the working class.

And we must rally art workers around their economic, political and ideological demands.

The Communist Party must take an even firmer grip on the lamp of Marxism and direct its rays ahead along this particular path, so that art can play its proper part in the struggles now being waged for the fate of humanity.